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SEPTEMBER 1988
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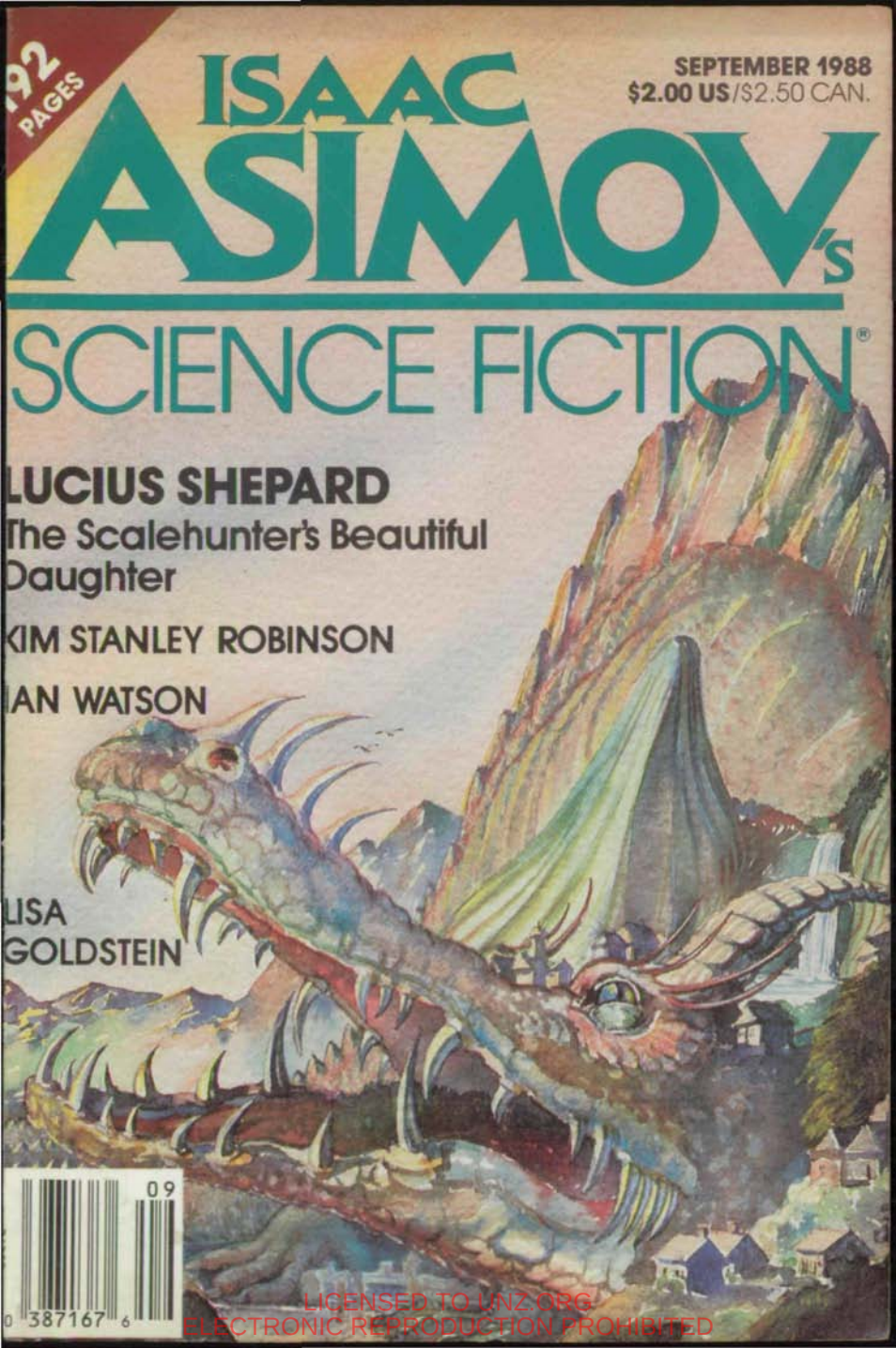

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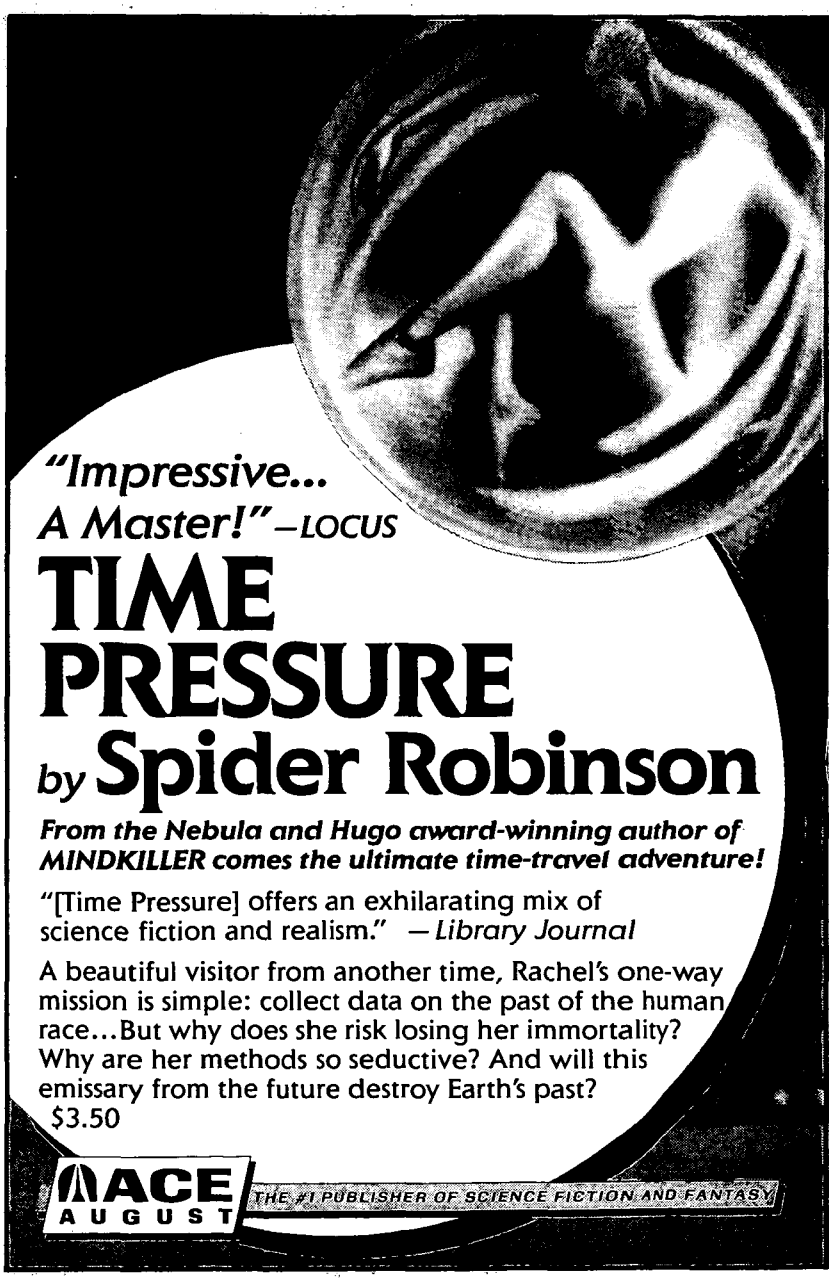
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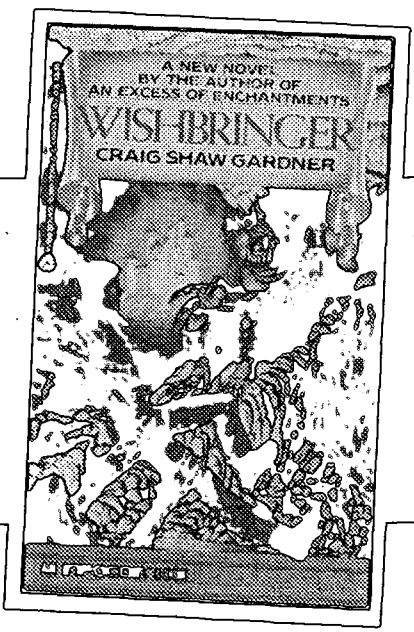

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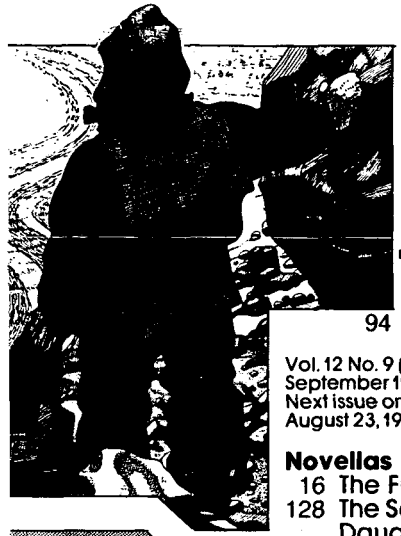

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EDITORIAL

by Isaac Asimov

SURPRISE

Life is full of surprises, most of them mild, and some of them pleasant.

Thus, I know perfectly well that when the mail comes, certain envelopes are more likely to contain checks than others, and I generally arrange to open the envelopes in the order of increasing expectations. The other day, an envelope which, to me, seemed certain of containing nothing of importance was opened fairly close to the beginning of the operation—and a sizable check tumbled out. Naturally, I was pleased, but first I spent a few moments of surprise.

The most intense surprise I have ever had was once, over thirty years ago, when I was living in Boston. I picked up the paper and there, in the obituary column, was the name of Laurence Oncley, a person I knew, who was in the prime of life, whom I had seen a couple of weeks earlier and who had seemed in perfect health. That was an unpleasant surprise that took me some time to recover from, but is not what I am referring to.

A couple of weeks later, I was with a group of people and in walked Oncley. I shot out of my seat with what could only have been a look of terror on my face. I don't suppose I ever came closer to thinking I was seeing a ghost. I simply could not understand it.

And as I stood there staring at Larry, with my eyes bulging, he said, "What's the matter?"

I said, "But I read in the paper that you—that you—"

I couldn't say it.

But he knew what I meant and he said, gently, "That was my father, Isaac."

How did I know that he was Laurence Oncley, Jr.?

It seems to me that in fiction, we try to achieve surprise now and then, as intense a surprise as possible, as intense (if possible) as we would experience if we were suddenly confronted by someone who had apparently risen from the dead. Whenever we have suspense, or a twist ending, or an improbable coincidence, the hope is that we will achieve that surprise.

But in science fiction, we try to achieve a special *kind* of surprise, that is achievable nowhere else. (To me, science fiction is full of special attributes.) Sam Moskowitz

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called that special kind of surprise a "sense of wonder," but this, to me, is insufficiently descriptive. I prefer to think of it as "techno-sociologic surprise." In other words, in science fiction, we present the reader with unexpected aspects of a society different from ours, aspects it may take him a moment to grasp and that will leave him with a feeling of delight at having encountered something totally unexpected.

To do it correctly involves clever technique. The very worst way of doing it is to have one member of a society explain the everyday attributes of that society to another member, who presumably knows all about it. The discussion is there only to inform the reader and it is an unbearably artificial device that only the most unsophisticated reader will fail to despise.

Ideally, you simply refer to something casually in such a way that the readers grasp in a moment a point about a society that is different.

The example usually given, in which this is done in exactly three words without explanation or ornament, is Robert Heinlein's sentence in one of his stories, "The door dilated."

You get an instant picture of a door opening up like the diaphragm of a camera or the iris of your eye. No door you have ever seen opens like that, but you can imagine exactly what happens. Isn't it wonderful to get something that new that quickly?

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(*IAsfm*, August 1987)

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"RACHEL IN LOVE"
by Pat Murphy
(*IAsfm*, April 1987)

Best Short Story

"FOREVER YOURS, ANNA"
by Kate Wilhelm

In fact, it might even start a train of thought in your mind that might give it healthful exercise and delight you even more. For instance, here is what goes through my mind at the thought of the door dilating—

The dilation into a circle is wasteful of space. The circle has to be large enough for a sufficient portion of it to sink below floor level in order to leave you a flat surface to walk across. You don't want to trip over a curved barrier. And if that happens, then the width you end with is considerably more than a single person requires.

What you really need is a door that dilates in such a way as to leave a rectangular opening taller than it is wide, since a person is taller than he or she is wide.

But how can that be done? By having it pulled up at two corners like a stage curtain?

And then I thought: Why not have it dilate by having two adjoining sections pull out sideways in opposite directions?

With that comes the instant thought: but we have that already. And we have it in such a way that a magic eye opens it as we approach. Or else we step on a mat and the pressure opens it.

Whereupon I get the suspicion that we'll never have a door dilating like the iris of an eye. Who needs it?

Here's another example. I recently read a story dealing with a society in which the gasoline shortage is such that the automobile has

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vanished and the horse has made a comeback. The author, in the course of the story, has someone refer, quite naturally, to the sweetness of the air now that automobile fumes were gone.

It was a very good touch. It was brought in naturally, without undue explanation, and it gave the reader a "Gee, that's right" feeling that could only be pleasurable.

Except that I happen to live near Central Park and I often pass those buggies that offer people rides through the park. And when I pass just *one* horse I am thoroughly aware of the utter lack of sweetness in the air.

The trouble is that people have forgotten what horses are like. They sweat, and when they sweat, they stink. What's more, they defecate, and when they do, they fill the roadways with the stuff and that doesn't smell like roses either. In fact, in the days when cities were full of horses, they were full of aromatic manure piles, too, which meant plagues of flies and plagues of plagues for that matter.

And if you think that automobiles clog the streets of the city and produce traffic jams, you ought to look at old pictures of New York in the 1890s. The streets were just as clogged with horses and carriages, and that was even worse, quite apart from the smell.

Automobiles do *not* have minds of their own. When they stop, they stop. Horses, however, *do* have minds of their own and those minds can be malevolent. They may start

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on their own just for the sake of devilment and, for all I know, they may lean over and bite some innocent pedestrian.

In other words, I think that the re-substitution of horses for automobiles would be an unmitigated disaster, but I might not have given the matter any thought if I had not read that particular science fiction story. So you see, even a wrong point of view can be useful.

I, myself, in my robot novels have continually running "Expressways"—a sort of perpetual railroad with an infinite number of never-ending coaches. In order to get on, people have to move up a series of strips, each moving parallel to the Expressway at a faster speed than the one before. Eventually, you get to the final strip which is moving at the speed of the Expressway. When you get to that strip, the Expressway is standing still relative to you and you simply get on. In getting off, you simply reverse the procedure. (I got the idea from Robert Heinlein's "The Roads Must Roll," so don't bother writing to tell me that I did.—And my conscience doesn't hurt. Writers borrow subsidiary points from each other freely. Would you like to count how many writers have made use of my Galactic empires and of my laws of robotics?)

In any case it wasn't enough just to have the Expressways. A whole litany of questions arises. How do children use the "strips"? What about old people who are no longer entirely ambulatory, and what about wheelchair cases? What happens to the wind effect as you move up the strip? After all, each strip may travel slowly compared to the one before, but the speed relative to the atmosphere goes up as you move on. What about the noise of a continuous train? Doesn't that drive people in the area crazy?

The reader is sufficiently interested in the story (I can hope) not to require very much explanation, but if you don't explain *at all* then he is quite likely to think of such things and, assuming that you don't, he will become irritated. If, however, you indicate that you *are* aware of such problems, you don't have to give blueprints and engineering specifications. A few comments and the reader is satisfied.

None of this is intended to frighten people out of attempting to write science fiction. I just want you all to know that *good* science fiction is more than just a plot; it's a society; a detailed, self-consistent society. It may be hard to construct, but the end result is delightful to experience, both for the writer and the reader. ●

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LETTERS

Dear Dr. Asimov:

In the Sept. '87 edition of your fine magazine I saw your editorial concerning David Godwin's letter which discussed the different divisions of science fiction, including hard science fiction (HSF) and fantasy. Given the popularity of such a discussion, I decided to muddy the waters a little with my own thoughts on the matter.

I recall that you once listed three stages society could be expected to pass through. These were: 1. Survival (PreIndustrial) 2. Technology-Oriented 3. Sociology-Oriented. I couldn't help noticing the similarities between these divisions and possible divisions in the field of SF.

Fantasy in SF could correspond to preindustrial eras in societal terms, that is, non-scientific processes are emphasized rather than hard science. I am thinking primarily here of "magic," such as in Anderson's Blue Adept series, or Tolkien's Middle Earth.

Technology-oriented SF is self evident. Emphasis is placed on scientific explanations and problem solving more than anything else. Examples of this sort abound, including most of the writings by yourself, Robert Heinlein, Niven and Pournelle, and many others.

However, the division overlooked by both you and Godwin (and, to be fair, by many others), is sociology-oriented SF. Here, neither processes nor problem solving are the primary areas of emphasis. In this form of SF, people, their thoughts and feelings about situations, take center stage.

Examples of writers of this type are Harlan Ellison (who advanced a good description of the field —"speculative fiction"), Kate Wilhelm, Kurt Vonnegut, J.G. Ballard, and, to a lesser extent, Robert Silverberg (*Dying Inside*).

I felt it necessary to point out this often overlooked area of SF which came into its own during the 1960s and '70s.

Sincerely,

Brian Cull
Dover, OH

I assure you I don't overlook sociology-oriented SF, as you call it. In 1953, I published an essay entitled "Social Science Fiction" in a collection of original essays about SF edited by Reginald Bretnor. As I look back on it three-and-a-half decades later, I don't think it was a good essay, but it dealt with "sociology-oriented SF," and that may have been before you were born.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

I enjoyed the first installment of Harlan Ellison's screenplay, and am wondering whether writing to

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Warner Brothers would do any good.

At the same time, I did have to fault it on one point: As a computer programmer and consultant, I have found religious organizations—fundamentalist or otherwise—to be quite state of the art in their use of computers. This is particularly true of those which utilize television, since the volume of mail which they receive cannot be handled in any other way. I found that I could not suspend my disbelief enough to think that this would change just because the computers acquired eyes and ears and arms and legs.

I think it is more likely that the fundamentalists will buy their own robots and plant them on street-corners, where they will hand out creationist tracts and greet passersby with remarks like, "You know that I couldn't have come into being without a creator. So how can you believe that you did?"

The "Frankenstein Complex" which some have feared, appears, for the most part, to have failed to materialize, probably because real life robots are not very much like those of classic SF. I think that most people find it hard to believe that a contraption which displays less creativity and initiative than the average two-year-old could really be up to anything all that sinister. Of course, as robots become more human-like, such a complex may develop, but I suspect that at that point further efforts at humanizing will simply cease.

Yours truly,

Robert W. McAdams
Lincoln Park, NJ

You know, I think you're right. One of my first robot stories, "Reason," dealt with a creationist robot, but I see now that I didn't go all the way. To broaden your point, let me mention the fact that nations that scorn Western ways and wish to return to the eighth century fall all over themselves to buy modern planes and tanks. It never occurs to them to fight with spears and swords.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

Hurray for Harlan Ellison! I just bought my November copy of your fine magazine and after reading your comments and those of Harlan Ellison about the writing and attempted production of the movie, *I, Robot,* I really had to write you.

Harlan Ellison did on October 25, 1978, what most science fiction fans dream of doing to a major studio head like the one he was forced to deal with. I try to believe that such banality and stupidity doesn't exist, but every day I see and read testamants otherwise.

Are we going to be deprived of seeing what appears to be a tremendous screenplay—I've only read the first part—so that those in Hollywood can create such cybernetic thrillers as: *Robocop?* (And according to the 27 September 1987 *Chicago Tribune, Robocop II*?) *Short Circuit?* (Personally, I feel that a plot device which involves giving an inanimate object life through electricity old even in Mary Shelley's day), and *The Terminator* (A movie in competition with *Robocop* for the award for most useless brutality)?

And yet Harlan's screenplay sits

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gathering dust on the shelves of Warner Bros. Are these people stupid? Who *wouldn't* want to see a screenplay written by Ellison, based on the book by the Good Doctor? It's a damn shame.

So, to Dr. Asimov, who wrote the wonderful book, and to Mr. Ellison, who wrote an equally wonderful screenplay, I have to say I'm sorry we might not get to see this movie made. Maybe someday in the future someone will see the advantage of making this movie, and will be pleasantly surprised when they realize just how many people will pay the four or five dollars to see Dr. Asimov's robots brought to life.

I, myself, would see it at least twice. Probably three times.

Sincerely,

Ross McPhail
Quincy, IL

I hate to sound cynical, but when I think of the tastes of most of the people who rush to see the blood, gore, and bash movies, I am moved to quote Shaw and say, "But what are we two against the vast majority."

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Isaac Asimov:

For your December editorial I can offer some sympathy. I am twenty-seven years old, just sold my first poem to *Amazing Stories* after eight years of writing, write one short story, one essay, and a few poems every week, and work twenty-five hours a week at a local textbook publishing house. I am also on the welcome committee of the national Science Fiction and Fantasy Workshop directed by Kathleen Woodbury out of Salt Lake City, Utah. I must write about three or four welcome letters a month for this group, and I often write additional letters to those who have similar interests.

Now that isn't much correspondence, but these new members write back and a regular letter exchange begins. After months and months the letters become numerous, about one a day (still, much less mail than you, Mr. Asimov, must answer)—but suddenly I find myself responding on 5x7 index cards with fragmentary sentences and hand corrected errors which make the cards look like an ink blotter.

I just don't put much time into editing a letter when I work and read and write ten or more hours a day. Some respond oddly to my index cards, but I find it a valuable lesson in answering all questions tightly and efficiently in the limited space of a single side. Tell me, how do these new writers find time to write when they are composing da Vinci letters? And, does this mean that when I am making a living writing I will have so little time that I'll be corresponding on 3x5 index cards?

Jason J. Marchi
Guilford, CT

PS: Please note this letter has no handwritten corrections and is not presented on an index card.

I, too, in glancing over the SFWA Forum and various fan magazines wonder how so many established writers can write so many and such long letters. When I first started publishing I continued to write long letters to the magazines until another writer wrote to tell me to con-

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centrate on my professional writing. I saw the point at once and my letters stopped.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

In your introduction (Nov. '87 issue) to Harlan Ellison's *I, Robot: The Movie* you stated "you had never had a novel or story converted into a motion picture or a television play."

I can remember viewing an adaptation of one of your stories, possibly *The Caves of Steel,* about twenty years ago on English television. So unless I am mistaken your work has not been entirely ignored.

Your magazine is good value and enjoyable.

Sincerely,

Anthony Hearne
Mercer Island, WA

You are quite right, but the adaptation was never shown in the United States and I never saw it. In my American-chauvinist way, I refuse to count anything that isn't made by a Hollywood company and distributed widely in the United States.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Isaac,

In response to your November editorial, let me suggest that writers like us (you might have included Jack Vance and Gordon Dickson in your list) should not mind being labeled "dinosaurs" —especially when we consider who they are that are doing the name-calling. After all, while the real dinosaurs were alive, the mammals were little nocturnal wretches that survived by sucking eggs and eating worms.

Regards,

Poul Anderson
Orinda, CA

You make a good point, Poul, and what's more if it hadn't been for that cometary collision (assuming it really happened) the dinosaurs would still be ruling the Earth today.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear folks:

By now Harlan Ellison's works have been exalted so often that even Mr. Ellison himself must be tired of hearing about it. Still, at the risk of being lost in the throng, let me add my voice in enthusiasm for the opportunity to read his version of Dr. Asimov's story. I, for one, consider Mr. Ellison's scriptwork, on balance, even better than his short stories. He can leave more vivid, crisp, and memorable images in the brain with technical descriptions than most movies *I've sat through.* It's downright spooky.

Sincerely,

Bob Hasse
Covina, CA

I think everyone would agree with this. When the movie people booted out Harlan, they asked a number of others to try their hand at doing a script version and it is my understanding that no one was able to turn one out that met even the unexacting standards of the movie moguls.

—Isaac Asimov

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Dear Dr. Asimov:

I just read *IAsfm's* first installment of Harlan Ellison's *I, Robot: The Movie.* It's a superb script. As I read it, however, I sensed that it simply was not a Hollywood movie. It isn't the right style. This is an adult movie, and when was the last time you saw an adult SF film? Where are the prolonged, fiery battle scenes (which constantly defy the laws of physics) and the cute robots that make cute noises? Big screen SF has gained the unfortunate reputation as being kiddy sci-fi.

And the public view is all-important to Hollywood. Literary SF reaches a minority of the public (science fiction readers). Hollywood's target audience, on the other hand, is the mass population; and with the budget required for Mr. Ellison's movie, it would have to reach a mass audience indeed. Why would Hollywood risk so much on a movie that doesn't fit its "mold"?

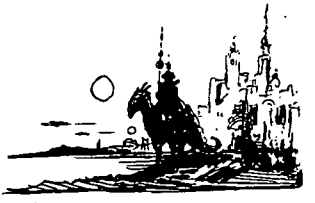
Perhaps it's just as well, though. If it did hit the silver screen, picture a likely scenario: After the script leaves Mr. Ellison's caring hands, who knows what creature it will become in the hands of everyone else involved with the film. And what about offshoots? Just in time for Christmas we would see Robbie-the-Robot toys, as well as young Susan Calvin dolls, in every department store. Soon a new Saturday morning cartoon would appear, featuring Robbie and young Susan tracking down and catching the bad guy each week (ever notice the amazing level of creative genius those programs have achieved lately?). Would we faithful SF readers wish such a fate for the story of such a master as Isaac Asimov?

But why be so cynical (albeit realistic)? Perhaps someday Hollywood will give us some good, untainted science fiction for the mature audience. Maybe we'll even see *I, Robot: The Movie* after all (done with respect and good taste, let's hope).

David Graham
Cincinnati, OH

Actually, I think you are right in all respects and it is considerations like these that cause me a) to refuse to turn my hand to movie and TV scripts, and b) to reconcile myself to a lack of TV or movie versions of my stories. However, there is one thing I regret. A movie version of I, Robot, *even a bad one, would temporarily boost sales of the book and I could scarcely object to that.*

—Isaac Asimov



CORRECTION:

The following paragraph was deleted from the April 1988 Gaming column:

"There are other Captain Power toys, like the Turret Gun Interlocker and the Power-On Energizer, with many more to come. When I played Captain Power recently, I used a 'Flight Training' videotape since the show had not yet started."

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GAMING

by Matthew J. Costello

Dungeon crawls are one of the most basic and most uninspiring of fantasy games. The premise in these games usually runs along these lines . . . there's a dungeon (or a castle, or some abandoned something-or-other) to be explored. There's the possibility of finding treasure, but also the likelihood of uncovering monsters, traps, and potions of unknown potential. If you can hack and slash your way through said dungeon and exit with the treasure, you are the winner. Not exactly the most sophisticated game, but not entirely without merit, either.

One of the first fantasy boardgames I played was something called *The Castle,* a game that came in a zip-lock bag, with a tiny map of a castle. It was one of Mayfair Games' first products and it involved nothing more than entering rooms, turning over cardboard counters, and fighting the monsters. In its own simple-minded way, it was fun. TSR, of Dungeons and Dragons fame, also produced a game called, appropriately enough, *Dungeon.* It reduced the essentials of a D&D quest down to a bare-bones board game.

There have been other such adventurous crawls but the form has fallen out of favor . . . (though the computer game companies continue to have a field day with the theme).

Recently, Games Workshop (Games Workshop, U.S., 8920A, Rt. 108, Columbia, MD 21045), the very powerful English game company, has been doing its bit to revive the genre. Two of its latest games are dungeon crawls, and one of them represents the state-of-the-art for the genre.

GW's *The Warlock of Firetop Mountain* is adapted from a solo gamebook of the same name, and the boardgame can also be played solo. Players wander through the environs of Firetop Mountain, stopping at an Inn, the Gambling Hall, and the Dragon's Lair before entering the maze leading to the Warlock himself.

A clever twist with this game is that players must gather keys from the various locations in order to get the three keys that will open the Warlock's chest.

A player's character has the important statistics of skill, stamina, and luck which can be used for everything from crossing the river to escaping the dragon.

Movement and play of the game on the meandering board, though,

(Continued on page 191.)

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THE
TEAM SPECTRA
REPORT

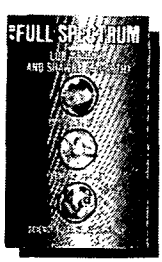
So, anyway, we were sitting in this great Chinese restaurant on West 54th Street called Imperial Dragon (where else would a bunch of science-fiction editors go?) and the conversation got around to the future of Spectra. In our ultimate publishing fantasies, we were asking, what kind of writing would we like to see more of? Well, each of us have specific sub-genres that interest us more than others, but all of us at the table agreed that we reserved our greatest affection for the kind of science fiction and fantasy that breaks new ground, that tells a story that hasn't been told a million times before. The kind that makes you sit back and wonder for a while.

By the time the Crispy Orange Beef arrived (stunningly prepared, big chunks of beef with wispy curls of orange rind), we had decided that we needed a new forum in which to declare our definition of the "state of the art." Almost as immediately, we decided that this forum should be an enormous original anthology and that it should be called Full Spectrum. So we announced our intentions to the community, the stories began to arrive and a year later we were very proud of the results.

Full Spectrum includes twenty-five stories and nearly 200,000 words from some of the most brilliant writers working in our field today. There are plenty of names you've heard before, such as Gregory Benford, Thomas M. Disch, Lisa Goldstein, Richard Grant, Nancy Kress, Jack McDevitt, James Morrow, Pat Murphy, Lewis Shiner and Norman Spinrad. There are several names you've heard before if you've been paying attention. And then there are five (yeah, we were surprised, too) stories—all *extremely* good—by writers who have never been published before. As you might have guessed from the title, the idea behind the anthology was to present the widest possible range of science fiction and fantasy reading experiences in one volume. Therefore the stories run from Spinrad's harrowing "Journals of the Plague Years," to Goldstein's dreamy "My Year with the Aliens," to Disch's haunting "Voices of the Kill," to Shiner's outrageous "Oz," to Kevin J. Anderson and Doug Beason's powerful, hard sf story "Reflections in a Magnetic Mirror," to Steven Bryan Bieler's gorgeous baseball story "Tinker to Evers to Chance."

In a very real sense, Full Spectrum is our love song to science fiction and fantasy. We hope it represents much of what is wonderful about our literature. Please give it a try.

And if you're ever in Manhattan, be sure to visit Imperial Dragon. Order the Velvet Corn Soup. Spectacular.



SPECTRA BANTAM

TEAM SPECTRA

FULL SPECTRUM

edited by Lou Aronica and Shawna McCarthy

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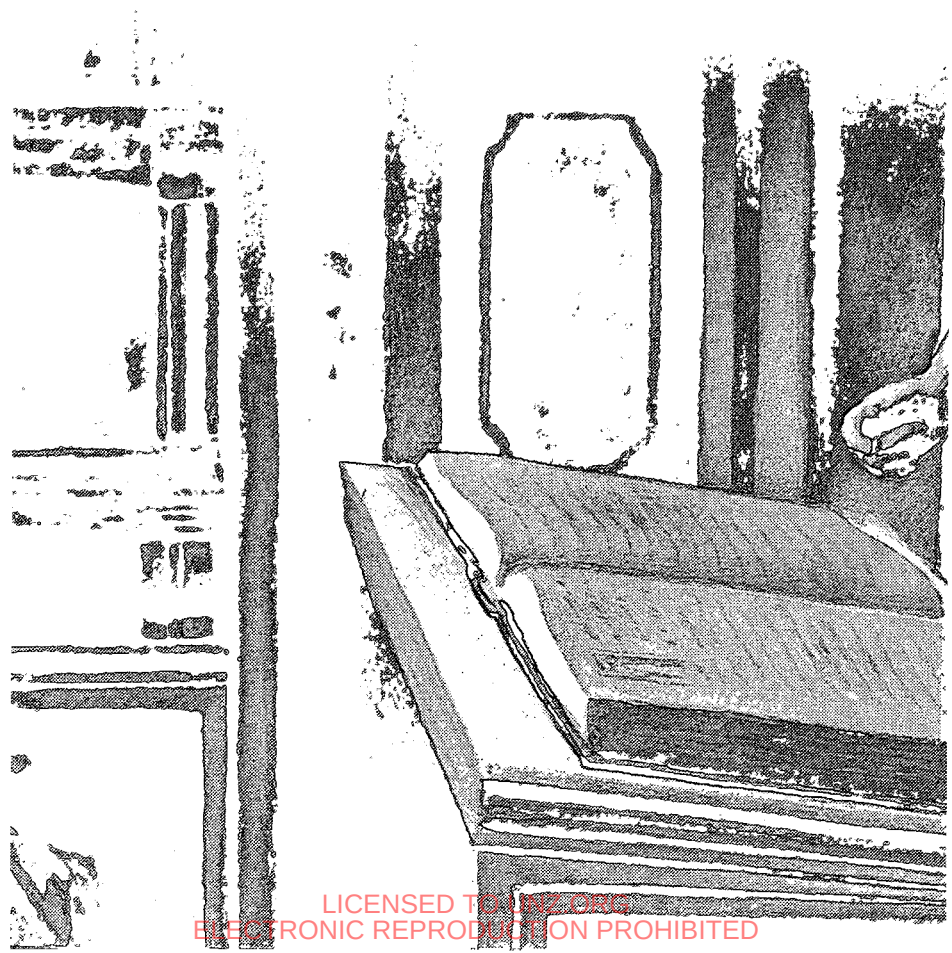
THE FLIES OF MEMORY

by Ian Watson

Ian Watson's latest US publication is *Queenmagic, Kingmagic* (St. Martin's), and his latest UK publication is *The Power* (Headline). Appearing in the UK during 1988 are *The Fire Worm* (Gollancz), an SF/horror novel; *Whores of Babylon* (Grafton), an SF novel; and *Meat* (Headline), a horror novel about animal liberation.

art: Richard Crist



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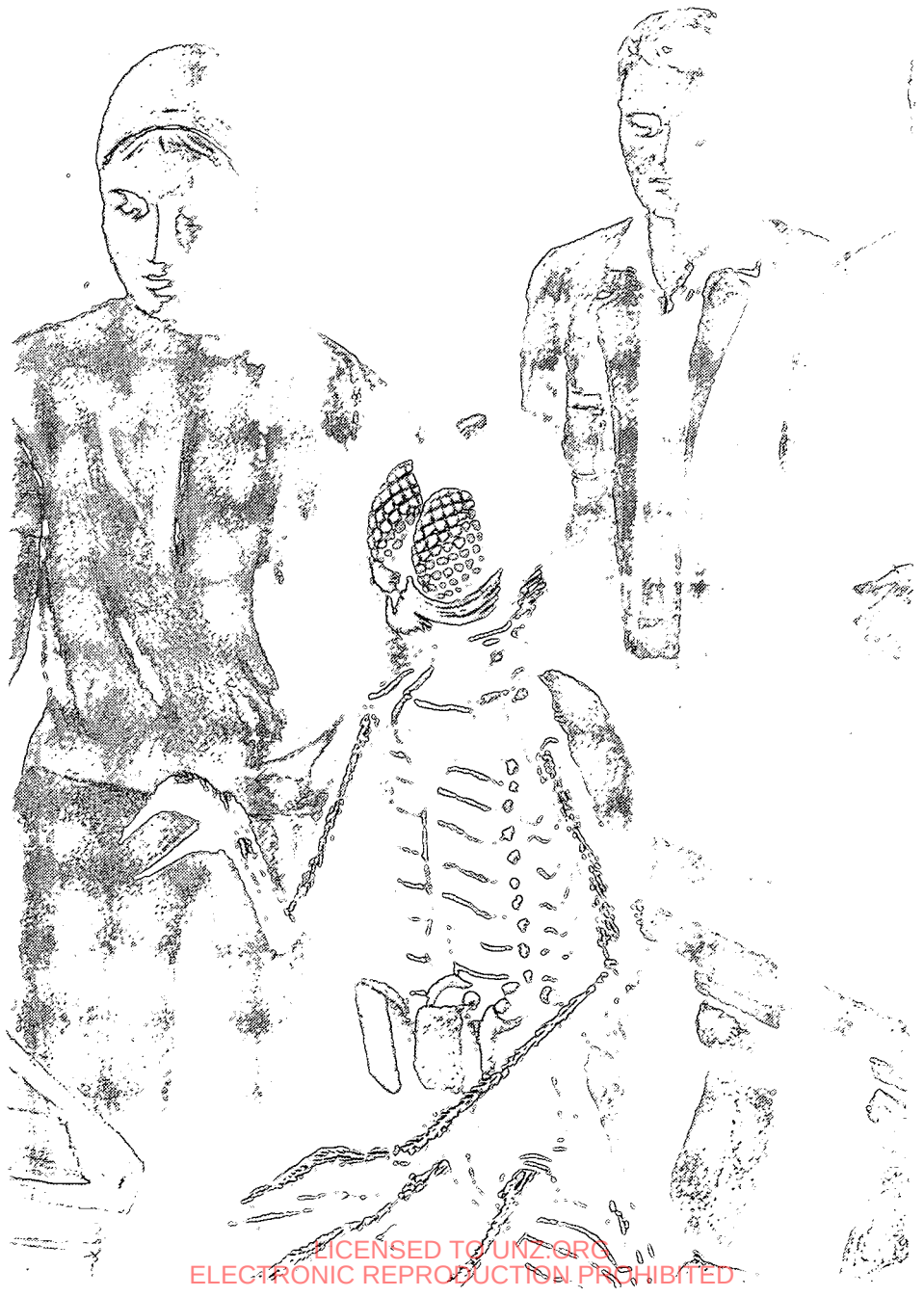

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Maybe it was snobbish of Charles, but he had always hated cameras, especially those in the hands of tourists. A dog peeing against a palace wall was acting sensitively; it was leaving a memory of itself. But how often did camera-toting tourists really *look* at anything? So how could a photo truly remind them?

When Charles was a boy he began to choose memory places for himself. There was the local cemetery: chestnut trees, bluebells, and marble angels. There were the sand dunes at sunset: spiky marram grass pointing thousands of fading sundial fingers seaward as if the world was splintering with hair-cracks. He would vow, "I'll fix this scene. In two years, ten years, I'll remember this moment exactly! Myself, here, now."

Of course he hardly succeeded; maybe that's why he resented cameras. Yet a chain of such magic moments had linked his life. *(And who is remembering him, right now?)*

Here he was in Scotland keeping another thread of faith, with his widowed father. En route back to his academic seat at Columbia University from the Geneva arms talks he had hired a Volvo to tour the Highlands. He owed the old man a decent holiday so that Mr. Spark senior could revisit his favourite sentimental sights and taste some good malt whiskies in their native glens. Charles also wanted a quiet time to think, about madness and Martine.

Scarcely had father and son started out than the alien Flies arrived on Earth. "We have come to your planet to *remember* it," so they said. Broadcasting, in stilted English and Russian, their requests to tour all the world's cities, the pyramid-ship settled gently into the Mediterranean offshore from Alexandria and floated, base submerged, not drifting an inch.

The unfolding news reached Charles via newspapers and TV in remote hotels. His father objected to their listening to the car radio.

"It's worse than a bloody election campaign," the old man groused as they were admiring Loch an Eilein. (Look: a solitary heron standing stock-still waiting to stab; jackdaws flapping over the castle ruin on the island.) "Blather blather. Most of it, sheer guesswork. Wait a few weeks and we'll know what's what." Mr. Spark was worried Charles would cut short their trip.

Mr. Spark never used to swear until his wife died in a car crash—which wasn't the old man's fault, though he wouldn't replace the car. "Where should I go to on my own?" he'd asked sadly after the funeral. Charles's parents had driven all over the Borders and Highlands with a consuming passion. Now Mr. Spark had taken to smoking a pipe, and swearing. You might have surmised that an anger rankled in him, and that a pipe was a substitute spouse. But Charles perceived that tobacco and rude words had been suppressed in his father many long years ago, although drams

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of whisky had been permitted. At the age of seventy-five Mr. Spark's behavior was fraying round the edges, a genteel net curtain in decay.

As they were rounding the Pap of Glencoe, Mr. Spark exclaimed, "Bloody ugly, that's what!" For a distorted instant Charles thought that his Dad was talking about the looming peaks of the glen. Grim, those were, though sunlit. Then his father went on, "Wouldn't want to meet one of your Flies on a dark night! Oh no. Nor would anybody in their right mind. Maybe your Martine might fancy doing their portraits. Just up her street, I'd imagine."

Mr. Spark had reason to be anxious. By now Charles had made several transatlantic phone calls from hotels to leave word of their itinerary. Already a week had passed and UNCO had been cobbled together, the United Nations Co-ordination Committee steered by America and Russia. Charles wanted to be in on this, and hoped he had sufficient clout and contacts. Already a thousand Flies had spread out from their floating Hive, and the Grand Tour had commenced in Cairo and Kyoto, San Francisco and Singapore, London and Leningrad and wherever else. Who would deny creatures which could fly a huge interstellar pyramid the way these aliens did? Who would not want to learn the secrets of their success?

"Look, son," said Mr. Spark after a while, "hordes of folk will all think they have special reasons for rubbing shoulders with these monstrosities. Why fuss on, when the buggers are going to be visiting everywhere? Bloody *invasion*, if you ask me. You'll see a Fly soon enough. Will we ever see the back of them? That's what I wonder."

Charles nodded, unconvinced.

"Look!" His father pointed at the sky.

It wasn't a Fly up there.

"Eagle?" Charles asked.

"Don't be daft, that's an osprey. Rare, those are. Almost extinct. It's going fishing in Loch Leven. Look at it. You'll likely never see another one." *(And I see it now, in shadow. Better than he did. Oh yes.)*

A few minutes later Mr. Spark was puffing contentedly, telling his son about the massacre of the MacDonalds. On his own terms the old man was good company, though really he and Charles had drifted worlds apart.

Charles's reputation was founded on his first book about body language, *The Truth of Signs*. Soon he was being retained as a consultant by defense and aerospace as a kind of walking lie detector. This led to his kibbitzing on the arms talks on behalf of the U.S. government. His next book, *Signs of Passion,* was his pop success.

Charles had a heightened sense of body language. If he couldn't ever

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record a chunk of scenery to his full satisfaction, he could read body signals and facial cues with an animal instinct. Not that he didn't need to *work* at this, scientifically; but let's not weigh ourselves down with talk of proxemics and kinesics, all the jargon of non-verbal communication.

You might think this would have immersed Charles in other people's lives as in a crowded jacuzzi, a hot tub of humanity. Not so. Old Eskimo saying: when you rub noses, you don't see the face. When you're watching the face, you don't rub noses.

Another week passed. By Rannoch Moor, to the Braes of Balquhidder to the bristly Trossachs. During convivial evenings spent with his Dad over a glass or several of ten-year-old Glenduffie, Charles caught TV pictures of individual aliens in Rome, Edinburgh, and he strained to read significance into their gait, their stance, their gestures . . . and those blank, insect faces.

The topic of Martine cropped up again at the Trossachs Hotel. Martine had been a sort of alien, too.

"At least there was no grandchild," remarked Mr. Spark. "Just as well, in my opinion."

A daughter-in-law who was part black, part brown, part blue for all he knew! Why should Charles have waited years then married such a person as Martine?

"Not that you ever met her," Charles said mildly.

"Why should *I* put myself out, an old chap?"

True, Martine wouldn't leave her one secure root in Greenwich Village. Charles had met her at a gallery opening just three months after Mrs. Spark's funeral. Within ten weeks he and Martine were married, and he had moved from his apartment off 116th Street into the Village for the next four years. When the break-up came, Charles returned to Upper Manhattan.

Loud tipsy Glaswegian talk babbled about them in the hotel bar. A stuffed golden eagle regarded visitors maliciously through glass eyes from inside its case.

"Maybe you ought to have had more children than me," Charles suggested, "and had them earlier."

"Costs money, son. You should know. Good schooling, Cambridge, all that. There's the trouble with education, makes you want the world on a plate. Ach, it's water under the bridge. Let's enjoy another dram."

Returning from the bar, Charles was aware of his father regarding him lovingly: his only son, big-boned and hardy-handsome, as the poet had written. Burly, though not tall. Shock of brown hair, already thinning at the crown. Broad, fresh, open face, with some crumpled laundry

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creases around the grey eyes. Generous lower lip, and thin mean upper lip which might have benefited by a moustache; but Charles hadn't wanted to copy his Dad, who had always worn a tash. A loving look could betray a glint of bitterness which a glance which was merely affectionate never contained.

"A plague of bloody Flies from space," sighed Mr. Spark. "Who'd have believed it? Cheers, lad."

Was there a weepy in the old man's eye? In Charles's heart salt tears stirred. The dead eagle's eye also glinted. At least that was an earthly eye.

None so blind as those who rub noses! As Charles finally realized, Martine was mad. Crinkly chestnut hair, hazel eyes, milk chocolate skin, slim as a boy with breasts, melting and assertive, wiry-tough and sensuous-soft; hermaphroditic! On first encounter Charles read her signs of passion. Perhaps *she* thought he held a key to human behavior, something which she illustrated only in faery or devilish parody. Perhaps Charles knew the secret of true expressions, a secret partly withheld from her.

In his lovely dark wife several persons cohabited, carrying out one psychic coup d'état after another. She was an artist in pen and ink, illustrating books and magazines. She drew inhabitants of a nether Earth, a population of goblins and nymphs which seemed to inhabit her, as subjects of her various ruling persons. These signaled out of her drawings with their fingers and their eyes, drawing Charles to her inexorably so as to understand those strange body signals.

Her art was always black and white; and flat without full perspective. Highly effective work—stunning—yet it seemed as if she lacked stereoscopic and color vision, because—because her elements would not fuse and co-operate. She was several flat people stacked side by side, each of them vivid in its stance, seen frontally. Each person seemed full of so much, yet let them tilt sideways and there were only two dimensions to them, with edges which could cut cruelly. Meanwhile a different Martine came to the fore.

She could never draw ordinary human faces—her rage when she tried to sketch *his!* Yet when she invented the features of a troll or elf or imp, oh yes, that's how those creatures would be; that's how they would express their alien feelings. At the height of his passion Charles wrote a preface for a book of her drawings entitled *Alien Expressions,* though she never drew "aliens" as such. The body language of her imaginary beings was human body language distorted in a hall of mirrors as if it had followed an alternative path of evolution. Or else distorted in a personal madhouse.

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Martine originally came from New Orleans, and was of wildly mixed ancestry. Perhaps this explained—to her!—her fractured self. Her brother Larry, a weather man down in Louisiana, was a regular guy. His only turmoils were natural storms, your ordinary sort of hurricane.

Ah, Martine. If Charles did undertake a new book to be called *Signs of Madness*—researched in clinics, illustrated by eighteenth and nineteenth century engravings of the inhabitants of Bedlam—might this seem an impeachment of Martine, a revenge? In turn might this make *Signs of Passion,* written while they were living together, appear to have been an exploitation of her?

Charles had hoped to sort this out in his mind while in Scotland; till the Flies came to Earth.

They took a steamer cruise on Loch Katrine. Eyeing the rumpled, lovely woodlands, Mr. Spark talked of Sir Walter Scott and Rob Roy. The Glaswegian trippers nursed sore heads so the outing was fairly peaceful. Father and son were only a stone's throw from the fault line between Highlands and Lowlands but they stayed in the former, plunging that evening in the Volvo downhill to the toy town of Inversnaid by Loch Lomond, to another Victorian hotel, and more malt of the glen. As a final ferry departed the little harbor for Inverglas across the loch, Mr. Spark stared at the summer sun setting.

"Just look at that golden whisky light falling on Ben Vorlich!" he exclaimed. "Remember it always—before it goes away!"

"When I was a boy," Charles started to say. He had never told anyone about his magical memory moments. Did his Dad also know about memory-photography? Had Dad seen a certain look in his son's eye?

A Scots voice interrupted, "Is there a Charles Spark in the bar? Telephone!"

By helicopter the next day from the hotel lawn to Glasgow, thence to Rome in a Lear-Fan executive jet. A chubby, genial American in his thirties, Lew Fisher, was Charles's courier; he had even brought a driver to Inversnaid to return the Volvo and Charles's father to the other side of Britain.

Why Rome? No less than eight of the aliens were flitting about Rome; no other city rated more than two Flies. UNCO was paying special attention to Rome.

Why the sudden V.I.P. treatment for Charles?

Orders.

Whose? Lew talked instead during the flight about antigravity. Not only could the aliens steer something five times the size of the Great Pyramid at Giza, but each was using a personal flying pack. Those whirry

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little wings couldn't support their body weight, let alone zip them along at jet speed. After the first week or so the scouts flew back non-stop to the hive—even from the other side of the world—then returned to wherever to continue sightseeing.

"Repulsion machinery," said Lew, "that's the theory. They're using the fifth force in nature, called, um, hypercharge. When we measure hypercharge it's gentle. Tiny. But our eggheads guess there are actually two extra forces involved, um, Yukawa terms, that's the name, both of 'em *big*. Only, one is attractive and the other's repulsive." ("Like the Flies themselves," Charles could hear his Dad mutter.) "So those almost cancel out. Well, the Flies have figured how to nix the attractive force, letting them tune the repulsive one. That may give them a force-field too. Deflect interstellar debris."

Lew was clearly no physicist. It was already plain to Charles how the CIA and KGB would be operating within UNCO, doing their best to be Cosmic Interstellar Agency and Kosmic Galaxy Bureau, both fishing for the secrets of the Flies.

Then there was the communication problem. Was the aliens' use of English and Russian *deliberately* poor? Their own lingo of whistles and chirps was uncrackable.

The bottom line: what was their game?

"The sun's going to blow up? They know, but we don't?" mused Lew. "They've guessed that we might wipe ourselves out? Shame to lose such a neat civilization totally. Let's remember it, guys. Or is 'remember Earth' a euphemism for shoving us aside? Meaning that we'll be no more than a memory?"

"Maybe they're the first interstellar package tour?"

"Without anything you'd call a camera? Just staring at things?"

"That's the way to see a world."

Lew cocked an eyebrow, then shrugged. "Welcome aboard the puzzle wagon."

He ran a videotape for Charles. Behold those sleek bodies, plated with a chitin so deeply blue it was almost black. Around the waist between thorax and abdomen the tool belt certainly included a powerful radio and location beacon. Consider those dome heads with the hairy ears and the twitchy moustache feelers and those big bulgy faceted amber eyes.

A Fly had six skinny hairy black limbs. Its arms ended in jointed claws. Its hind "balance" legs were short, its abdominal legs four times as long. When a Fly hurried, its body pivoted up on to those long legs till it was almost horizontal, little legs wagging like rudders. That was how a Fly sometimes launched itself into the air; but the wings were undoubtedly science, not biology. Perhaps the ancestors of the Flies once

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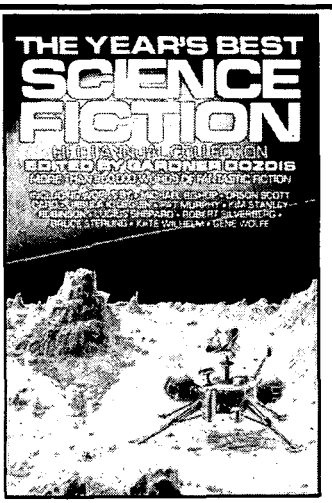

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had wings, which withered as the species evolved; now Flies wore wings again, re-invented.

"They can't be true insects," said Lew. "Anything that size needs an internal skeleton. They breathe like us. Yeah, breathe our air, and eat our food—though they're like flies in that regard! Prefer the trash cans of restaurants, not the haute cuisine inside. They could inhabit this planet quite happily, Charlie."

Charles was to stay at the American Embassy in the Via Veneto; and on arrival Lew ushered him in to meet the regional security chief who was UNCO liaison man, name of Dino Tarini, an Italian-American.

Tarini, mid-forties and scrawny, wore an impeccable cream silk suit and did not blink like other people, irregularly, inconspicuously. He stared—then once a minute or so he shuttered his eyes briefly as if he were some human surveillance camera making a time-lapse record of what went on. His high-tech desk and leather chair were backed by framed photos of Michelangelo's David and the Statue of Liberty looking strangely like brother and sister.

"Carlo, you eyeball some sights with Lew today. Try out Santa Maria sopra Minerva. A nun's showing one of the Flies round this afternoon. Interesting church, Carlo. It's Dominican. Dominicans ran the Inquisition. Grand Inquisitor's statue's there. They prosecuted Galileo in the convent next door. Showed him the thumbscrews."

Tarini plainly resented the way a string had been pulled on Charles's behalf and had a low opinion of the relevance of body language. *(By whom had the string been pulled? Ah. . . .)*

The following morning an UNCO bull session was scheduled at the Farnese Palace, which housed the French embassy: neutral territory, thus to underline international co-operation.

"French don't swap intelligence with us or the Soviets; whereas Italians allow our missiles on their soil, don't they?" As venue Tarini would have preferred an Italian government building staffed by his cousins.

"Tomorrow evening: reception at the palace. Try to talk to a Fly, Carlo. Why do they go back to the Hive?" Find out. Prove your worth.

"Maybe they get homesick," said Charles.

Tarini closed his eyes, recording the witticism.

"Yeah, and maybe there's a queen-fly roosting in there, a great black squashy mass that was full of eggs. Maybe she hatched all the other little Flies while the ship approached; programmed all her sons."

"You don't sound as though you like them too much, Don Tarini." Yes, give him the title of a Mafia godfather.

"Some things about our visitors we like very much."

Questions hung in the air. Did the Hive have defenses? How to find

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out non-disastrously, whilst also laying out the golden credit card from Kyoto to Copenhagen, the red carpet from Berlin to Odessa? The road to the stars lay open; but Flies crowded it.

"Will they share their knowledge with us if we're *nice* to them?" Tarini was lying.

Rome was aromatic with the scent of flowers, coffee, olive oil, whiffs of unfamiliar tobacco, mixed with puffs of exhaust fumes and drain stench. The whole hot, humid city—streets, pavements, walls—droned a faint mantra. Hum-om-hum.

After catching beers and mortadella sandwiches at a bar beyond Trevi, Charles and Lew played chicken to cross the Via del Corso. Their destination was a piazza where a marble elephant supported an obelisk carved with hieroglyphs. The beast stood on a plinth, knitting its brows, its trunk slung rearwards as if to squirt dust. What big cabbage-leaf ears it had, pinned back in sculpture. The area between Jumbo and the scabbed cliff-face of the church of Santa Maria above Minerva was cordoned by police in dark blue, cradling machine pistols. Several hundred spectators, including newsmen and paparazzi slung with cameras, waited for a sight of the alien.

Showing their UNCO credentials, the two men were admitted into the chill of the church, where blue marble geometry inset a white marble floor, highly polished. Black marble pillars, flecked pink, lined the nave. Curving medallioned groin-vaulting supported a star-studded imitation sky. A multitude of side chapels . . . any description of this church was a cartoon! Ten thousand sentences couldn't capture every detail in remembrance.

Down at the transept half a dozen UNCO people were scrutinizing a chapel, from which a soft clear voice emerged. The chapel was graced by a statue of a pope and a fresco of an angel with blue swan's wings half-furled. Watched by cloaked prelates a dove spat golden fire at a kneeling Madonna. In front of this painting a lanky young woman in a long blue frock, her flaxen hair peeping from under a blue headscarf, was patiently addressing . . . the very opposite of an angel: a five-foot-tall black Fly, mosaic eyes clamped to its head like swollen golden leeches. Now and then the woman touched her necklace, of variously sized turquoise beads, a chain of little blue moons.

"Here in the Carafa Chapel you see the Annunciation as painted by Fra Lippo Lippi. . . ."

"Yes," the Fly responded in a dry, rattly, jerky tone. It seemed to be drinking in every detail of the chapel as thirstily as Charles had ever stared at a scene when he was a boy. He sniffed but could detect no alien odor, only wax polish and candle smoke.

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"The nun's Dutch," whispered Lew. "Outfit called Foyer Unitas, specializing in guiding non-Catholics. Very much in depth. They can gab on half a day about a single church." As indeed the woman seemed intent on doing.

"They hope to convert non-Catholics, aliens included?"

"No, they're simply ace guides. Got the right pace for the Flies, who look at everything for ages."

The two men followed the guided tour around till Charles knew more than he ever needed to know about Santa Maria sopra Minerva.

Lo, here is the tomb of Saint Catherine of Siena. There is the very room where she died in 1380, frescos by Romano. Lo, here is the chapel of Saint Dominic housing the tomb of Pope Benedict XIII, sculpted by Marchioni between 1724 and 1730. The Dutch nun fiddled inconspicuously with her necklace while she talked.

"Yes," the Fly said periodically.

That evening, Lew took Charles to a trattoria he recommended. Superb sea-food ravioli in garlic butter followed by a delicious concoction of lamb brains, and home-made ice cream. A friendly Chianti, then some fierce Grappa. Charles still wondered who had called him to Rome but didn't wish to lose face by asking outright.

The Farnese Palace was built like the noblest of prisons, its windows facing upon a dark, majestically porticoed courtyard into which rain poured that particular morning. In the crowded conference room Charles soon spotted Valeri Osipyan. In Geneva at the arms talks the KGB psychologist Colonel had been accompanied to begin with by a fat old woman aide (his peasant mother?), then later by a sly wisp-haired fellow whom the Russians claimed was a chess master, only no one had ever heard of him.

In their own fashion the Russians were deploying scrutiners of human behavior to follow suit the American lead in non-verbal, nuance interpretation of the talks, and the negotiators. How could one ultimately *trust* the other side? That was becoming a question almost as vital as warhead verification—to Charles's mind at least; and he as a British expatriate might have added, "How do you trust your own side?"

The vinegary, purse-lipped Colonel was a hard one to read. At a reception in Geneva Osipyan had inquired with apparent sympathy how it was that Charles hadn't correctly read the body language of his own wife, with whom he had so recently split up? Western colleagues were listening. Was this said to undermine Charles's credibility? To demonstrate the depth of KGB information? Was it a subtle warning not to let a possible prejudice color his readings of the honesty of Irina Kovaleva, the new Soviet negotiator who happened to bear a certain resemblance

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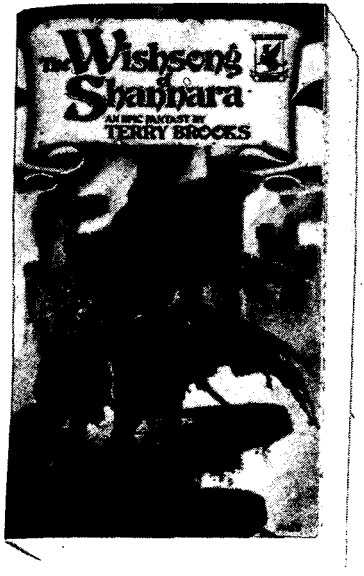

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(skin color excluded) to dear, wayward, hysterical, ultimately hateful Martine?

Charles had replied, "Now that we've begun taking body language seriously I can imagine negotiators being kept ignorant of the full, true picture by their *own* side."

"You can be too subtle," Osipyan had retorted. "We're a bluff people at heart. Basically blunt and frank."

"Bluff has another meaning."

"Nowadays we always tell the simple truth. You hunt for subtleties to worm yourself off the hook of peace."

"A hook catches the unwary prey."

"Women sometimes catch men by hiding their hook in a lovely lure, Mr. Spark."

"Did your grandmother tell you that? It *was* her who was with you last year?"

Osipyan had smiled tightly. No, the Soviet truth-sayer had not been his grandmother, or mother.

Now here was the Colonel in Rome, facing Dino Tarini across the huge oval table as some forty UNCO personnel sought their name cards and settled down. Others took refuge in armchairs scattered about the room, made notes, consulted files.

An hour later, an Italian biologist was saying, "The aliens *look* identical to flies. Like insects they display industry and persistence. Do they have true individuality? Are they genuine intelligences?"

"To remember is to be intelligent," Osipyan said. "Besides, they talk to us."

"After a fashion! Maybe they have developed awareness to a remarkable degree . . . for insect types. Powerful instincts may still rule them, far more than we are ruled."

Tarini nodded. "What if they're really biological machines? With eyes which are lenses, brains which are recording equipment? Why shouldn't they fuel themselves with any garbage? Why should they have *taste?*"

"Taste enough," said a Vandyke-bearded linguist from Rome University, "to admire the masterpieces of our culture."

"Indiscriminate cataloging. Like auctioneers." There was scorn in Tarini's voice. "It would be interesting to know if they can reproduce, or if they're just specialized living machines. Now suppose one of them crashed in a regrettable accident—"

"No," said Osipyan. "A large floating pyramid says no."

"A pyramid we can't see inside of."

"Compound eyes oughtn't to see as clearly as *our* eyes," the same biologist declared.

"Depends how the brain is programmed," said a French colleague.

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"Surely they must have a single central brain, not different ganglia spread throughout the body like insects? Let's forget the insect analogy."

"A dissection could settle these questions."

Osipyan pouted at Tarini. "People may play dirty tricks with one another, because we know the rules. To play these games with aliens is the height of folly."

"Perhaps it's the height of naïvete not to? You Russians are so romantic about aliens."

Charles found himself speaking. "The Flies look at the sights with a relaxed intensity. With those compound eyes they're seeing more intensely than any human tourist. A machine would simply record. They're not just cameras. I'm sure of it."

Osipyan swung round. "So, Mr. Spark, in your view does landing a pyramid, which dwarfs the Egyptian pyramids, quite close to those same pyramids serve as a gesture of cultural solidarity—or as a caution that their power and technology likewise dwarfs ours in the same proportion?"

Charles shrugged, having no idea. If he was a violinist of human nuances, he was being asked suddenly to take up playing the trombone or the tuba; an alien instrument.

The quirky tilt of Osipyan's chin and the droop of his eyelids said that Charles was admitting inability. Yet Charles wasn't the prime target for the Colonel, whose glance glided onward to Tarini.

"We need to discover new rules," the Russian said, "not the same old ones. Why should aliens play our games? We need to know the simple truth about them."

"They aren't exactly spelling out their motives," grumbled Tarini. "*Remember:* what does that mean?"

Something, thought Charles, which was so much a part of their nature, of their biological existence, that the Flies could be blind to it—as a peculiarity which might baffle strangers.

Lew had detailed a marine guard from the American embassy to act as gumshoe. After a leisurely beer and sandwiches in a café following the bull session, Lew consulted a two-way pocket radio and set out with Charles for the church of Sant' Ignazio half a mile away.

Sharing a large umbrella, they walked till they reached the fringe of the mobile carabinieri cordon which accompanied a Fly when on foot. No alien anywhere in the world had yet been attacked or threatened—perhaps no fanatic could think of a good reason—but police protection certainly gave a Fly some open space to sightsee in.

By now the rain was slackening off, but after hours on the streets, even under an umbrella, the waiting marine was soaked. As had the nun been, he reported; however, once she reached Sant' Ignazio a priest had

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turned up to deliver a change of clothing and footwear. The Italian-speaking marine had heard the man in the soutane explaining to the police that he brought these dry clothes from the nun's base in the Pamphili Palace, Piazza Navona. Rain merely rolled off the Fly.

The slow tour that morning had taken in the Pantheon and Piazza della Rotunda. At lunchtime, the nun had steered the Fly along the Via Monteroni to sample French colonial pig-swill from the dustbins of *L'Eau Vive,* followed by a trip inside that restaurant—housed in a sixteenth century palazzo—so that the sister could have a decent bite too.

"You've done good. We'll take over."

The marine departed gladly.

"Damn stupid conference," muttered Lew. "Couldn't have been worse timed."

"Why's that?" asked Charles.

"A visit to the Vatican has just been arranged—very likely."

"By the priest who brought the clothes? He was a go-between?"

"No, listen, Charlie, that restaurant *L'Eau Vive* is where all the Vatican bigwigs dine out. It's staffed by stunning young nuns with a special dispensation to wear sexy dresses."

"Sounds risqué. What goes on?"

"Just splendid expensive eating. The waitresses all wear golden crosses to remind their eminent clientele of chastity. Could put cardinals off their cuisine and vino if it was served gloomily."

"Remind them of poverty?"

"Something like that. They still need moral ladies to serve them. That's where the princes of the Church hang out; and that's where she took the alien. Obeying orders, I'll bet. Vatican must be pretty stirred by an alien race turning up. Haven't spoken out yet. No Flies have visited there—to see the finest sights of all." Lew shilly-shallied. "I have to split. I'm going to talk to Dino. We'll see if we can get a list of reservations at *L'Eau Vive.* Will you keep a close eye on the sister while you're Fly-watching? She's called Kathinka."

Lew offered Charles an umbrella escort through the ring of armed, rain-caped carabinieri to the door of Sant' Ignazio.

"The Soviets might pretend to be pussy-footing, but what is the Vatican up to? There are at least six Machiavellis on the staff." He fled.

The Fly was staring up at the ceiling with rather more than "a relaxed intensity." The alien seemed perturbed, under strain, as if controlling an urge to unfurl its wings and zoom up to the heaven-painted dome to accompany Saint Ignatius Loyola on his journey direct to Paradise. If so, it would have banged its head. This only dawned on Charles as he heard

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Sister Kathinka (crisp and dry) point out to the Fly how cunningly the real building flowed into its painted continuation.

The dome was a trompe l'oeil, an eye-deceit, an illusion of art. The work of the Jesuit priest Andrea Pozzo shortly after 1685. Hats off to Fra Pozzo! No one had bothered to build the planned cupola, consequently he had painted it in. The illusion was extraordinarily convincing; the alien gazed at it for the best part of an hour. Even Sister Kathinka exhausted her repertoire and stood mute. Meanwhile Charles had been joined by other UNCO spectators, amongst them that Italian linguist with the beard, who frowned at the continuing silence.

At long last the Fly came to terms with the spectacle overhead, and turned to the nun.

"Yes, yes, like our tanks." Briefly the alien seemed to float, buoyed up.

Professore Barba scribbled in a notebook. "It *likes*," he murmured. "It *thanks* the sister." Charles had heard something else entirely.

The Fly again addressed the sister, who had perhaps lost track of the tour.

"Memory vanished? Because heaven is false?"

The nun touched her necklace as if for reassurance.

"This painted heaven is not the true heaven," she replied. "I have told you all I know about the ceiling."

"No more is known about Saint Ignatius?"

"Oh yes! Why, there are whole volumes written about him. They fill shelves in the Vatican Library."

"Volume is cubic size?"

"Books!" Sister Kathinka led the Fly to the lectern, where a huge brass-bound Bible lay open.

"Here is the most important book. It contains the word of God."

The Fly tapped the pages with a fuzzy claw. Its moustache quivered.

"This Bible is in Latin," explained the sister. "That's the old language of this country. The language is dead, but it still lives in the Church, just as Christ is dead but still lives."

At that moment two facts became intuitively obvious to Charles. The nun had been encouraged to explore the possibility of converting the aliens to Christianity. Secondly, this alien had no idea of the function of a book—what it was! The aliens possessed no written language.

Mightn't that be the case with a sufficiently advanced race? Even on Earth the electronic tide was submerging literacy. People of the super-science tomorrow could easily be illiterate. And yet, and yet . . .

The dining room of the French embassy was a welcome antidote to the severe aspects of the Farnese Palace, a gush of gaiety sensuously deco-

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rated by the Caracci brothers with the Triumph of Love. Four of Rome's Flies were present at the event.

"Charles Spark? I'm Olivia Mendelssohn. Head of White House Security. President's personal representative. We'll be working together, you and I."

"We will?"

Olivia was short. The crown of her head only came level with his chest, and Charles was no giant. She was mid-thirties, perhaps shading forty. Charles recalled her face from earlier in the conference room, though that morning she had seemed intent on remaining inconspicuous. Previously, her black hair had been roped in a tight ponytail, hadn't it? Freed now, it swept luxuriously around bare shoulders of a light buttery hue. Olivia was dressed in a glittery gown of darkest blue instead of—what had it been before?—a grey jacket, skirt, and ruffled white blouse.

With a vague nod Lew melted away into the crowd.

Earlier, Olivia Mendelssohn had worn dark glasses. Now her eyes were naked. And huge. They were large brown liquid eyes in any case, but she had enlarged them further by applying kohl. Her smoothly oval face was of generous enough proportion—just—to accommodate such eyes. Was she trying to attract alien attention by that gown which copied the color of their bodies; by those enormous eyes?

Her legs were shorter than her face or trunk or bosom merited. The evening gown molded those legs together into a stumpy mermaid's tail glistening with scales, upon which she perched. Her shoes—expensive, black-dyed crocodile skin—pointed apart, somewhat like the fork of a tail. Hans Andersen's Little Mermaid had summoned Charles to Rome!

"We'll need to be fully open to each other, Charles, in order to osmose your talent and mine together."

"Yours being a talent for security?"

"For something else too! Here isn't the place or time . . . we'll have to be franker than any barbed insights of Colonel Osipyan into your failed relationship with Martine."

Charles blinked. "You seem to know me inside out."

He collected a glass of champagne from a passing, duck-tailed waiter. Olivia barely moistened her lips with an orange juice. Amidst the throng of French embassy staff and other foreign diplomats, Italian government ministers, UNCO personnel, several churchmen in black soutanes and stiff white collars, a lone nun in a black habit, and of course four aliens, a cardinal stood out: a stout tropical bird in his scarlet cassock, cape, and biretta. To Charles at that moment little Olivia stood out much more.

"Your Martine," she said, "was a pool of emotions in which you could fish but not swim, or sail. On account of the sudden storms. The spouts,

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the maelstroms. She was so fluid, so labile, wasn't she? That was why you couldn't read her, fix her nature."

Tilting her head, Olivia stole a glance up at the sumptuous ceiling; and Charles thought to himself, "The Failure of Love. For me. Not the Triumph."

"Ultimately," continued Olivia, "Martine shook herself apart; and you too. She broke the banks, so far as you were concerned. You had hoped to be those banks, confining the pool, framing it like a setting for a rare jewel. She wasn't a jewel, though. She was . . . dissolution . . . a persona written in bitter if sparkling water, inhabited by toads as well as by such wonderful, delicious, slippery fish."

This peculiar conversation—her side of it—captured Charles even more than the presence of aliens in the room.

"Professionally I plug leaks," she said. "Nowadays we need an enormous leak—from the alien side. Any signs of moisture yet?"

With an effort Charles hauled his attention back to the matter of Flies.

"Yes, I believe they're illiterate."

"Aaah?"

"I don't think they know what writing *is*—letters or squiggles or dots or hieroglyphs."

The alien guests were drinking in the details of the room while a number of UNCO mavens and dignitaries side-stepped like so many geosynch satellites, keeping out of their direct field of vision. Each alien held a glass of whitish liquid. A glass was emptied; a waiter suavely furnished a full one. As the waiter shimmied by, Charles stopped him.

"What are the aliens drinking?"

"Sour milk, Signore." The man made a face. "Seven days old."

"You have Egyptian blood," Charles said suddenly to Olivia.

It was those eyes of hers, so vastened by the dark cosmetic! Perhaps aping some Renaissance princess she had even put drops of belladonna sap in those eyes to dilate them?

"My Mom was half-Egyptian," she agreed. "And my Dad, half-Jewish. Should we try to talk to a Fly?"

So they headed towards the nearest alien, though Charles concentrated on Olivia's body language as much as upon the Fly's. On the whole she walked fluidly and loosely. Once, twice, she stiffened momentarily. He wondered whether she had ever suffered a dislocated hip; whether as a child she had even undergone some experimental bone-stretching régime in an effort to increase her height. Underneath her gown would residual scars on legs and thighs betray where metal pins had pierced through to her skeleton? No, that was absurd. He merely wanted an excuse to undress her. She seemed to be offering herself to the alien, using some

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body speech of her own concoction, yet at the same time resisting, flinching.

"Good evening!" She stared the chosen Fly full in the eyes. "Do you like this city?"

"Yes." That rattly voice. "I remember it." The voice of a husk: sticks, hairs rasping together, no liquid music of vocal chords. Gazing at its mouth parts—a sort of black beak around pursed softness—Charles imagined the alien sucking him dry, discarding him as a human husk. He smelled the curdled tang of the sour milk in its glass.

I remember it. Unless the Flies were masters of invisibility they had never visited Rome before, Renaissance or ancient or in-between.

"What do you do next?" Olivia asked.

"Fly back to ship, dis-gorge." Its short legs, then its long legs, twitched. Charles visualized bees returning to a hive, their hairy legs yellow with pollen. In the hive the dust from many flowers became the honey that nourished—what?

"Do you disgorge in a tank?" he asked it.

"Yes." Japanese people were notorious for saying "yes" when they merely meant that they were listening politely.

"What kind of tank is that?"

"Tanks of memory."

Thanks for the memory. . . . Charles hummed this tune to himself. The Fly's moustache bristled. Could Tarini be right, that the aliens were biological recording machines which returned to be unloaded, emptied for the benefit of some other creature, hideous to behold?

Yet this Fly seemed informative. While onlookers avidly eavesdropped he asked:

"Do your eyes see many images of the same object? We see one image."

It looked into his eyes. "Yes, many objects, in order, to remember."

"What is in those tanks?"

"We. We float." As in that church, momentarily this Fly appeared free of gravity.

"How many tanks?"

"Thousand."

A pyramid full of tanks . . . and floating flies, emptying themselves . . . what did it mean?

A burly Russian, perspiring in a suit which looked to be woven of material half an inch thick, joined in chaperoned by Osipyan.

"Comrade Starman, please! Did your ship fly here by the force of repulsion?"

The Fly stared at a luster-hung lamp, the crystal facets glittering and twinkling. Answer came there none.

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"Have your people visited other inhabited planets in the cosmos?" the Russian persisted.

"Yours first to signal presence to us. So we came."

Pleased, the Russian was visibly calculating to himself light years and the chronology of radio and TV output from the Earth.

"Just in time," the Fly added, unnerving Osipyan.

"Why did you truly come?" the Colonel demanded.

"Our world is full," was the reply.

"Full, of Flies?"

"Our places are fully remembered. Here are new places. Do you remember all your places? Have any disappeared?"

"Places disappear if you don't remember them?" broke in Charles.

A jerk of the Fly's head.

"We must leave," it said. Draining the clotted dregs, it handed its glass to the Russian scientist who cradled this as though it were an alien artifact. "Thank for hospital. Ity."

Olivia smiled graciously. "You must fly. After you dis-gorge, what next?"

"I start to remember Vatican City. Goodbye."

Charles had realized by now that the nun in the room was the same Sister Kathinka. Her flaxen hair was entirely hidden by her coif and white wimple, and she wore a long black pleated gown, with a cross dangling on beads from her waist. She had reverted to habit. Accompanied by Olivia, he headed over to introduce himself to this woman he was supposed to keep an eye on.

"I don't know how you find the energy, Sister. A walking guide-book! Hour after hour must be a strain." (Please don't say that you find the strength in Jesus or Mary!)

When Kathinka smiled, she showed perfect white teeth which she must brush often.

"The standing is the hard part." Her breath was scented with mint. "One has to learn poise. Actually I practice ballet exercises. When I was a girl in Holland I wished to be either a ballet dancer or a religious. Those are both similar callings, you know! Dedication, rigors of the body, aim of grace. But." Glancing at Olivia, she fell silent.

"You grew a little too tall," Olivia completed. "Your choice was made."

"By God."

"Do you need to look official this evening?" Charles nodded at her black garment.

"No, it occurred to me that I have been wearing the wrong clothes to put my aliens at ease. Now I resemble them, a little."

They chatted about her work.

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"The . . . *choreography* of each tour takes much attention, so that nothing is forgotten, so that no fact disappears."

Had the Fly meant that people might forget bits of history, and thus lose the true depth of things—which could fade from awareness?

"Do the aliens regard you as remarkable?" Charles asked her. "Being able to disgorge so many bits of information, all in the right order?"

Many objects. In order. To remember.

"It isn't remarkable, Mr. Spark. All the objects are there. The information hangs upon them, as upon this." She held up her chain of beads. "Bead after bead. We tell our beads. Likewise, while I guide."

"Your necklace!" Charles exclaimed. "The turquoise necklace."

"You noticed that? Yes, it's my mundane rosary. I do not often misplace a fact."

Olivia gazed intently at the nun. "Each fact is a private prayer." She stated this as a certainty. "Your whole day is a chain of prayers—on behalf of your heretic or infidel tourists who never realize how slyly they are being blessed." Olivia jerked her face in the direction of the ceiling. "Somebody painted those erotic scenes in the year whatever. Bingo, another prayer is said!"

A mischievous smile played about the Dutch woman's lips. "Annibale and Agostino Caracci, between 1597 and 1604. There, you are blessed with information! This is the information age, isn't it?"

"You use those beads as your abacus, a medieval instrument, a harking back."

This made the nun frown and almost turn away. Hastily Charles intervened.

"A Fly told us it's going to visit the Vatican. Will you be guiding it?"

"It. Or another."

"You're much in demand."

"If asked, I obey."

"Is the Vatican visit the reason why that cardinal's here tonight?"

"Cardinal Fantonetti? Of course he would be here. He is the vicar-general of Rome." No, that particular cardinal had nothing to do with trips to the Vatican, which was another city, another country.

"Do you know all the cardinals, Sister?"

"How could I know the Cardinal Archbishop of Calcutta, or of Guatemala, or of the South Seas?" She knew more, much more, than she was saying; or was allowed to say.

"Do you bless the Flies too?" pressed Olivia.

"As you say, Mr. Spark, it is a strain. I must return to our order's house to pray and sleep."

Charles recalled the address. "I know the Piazza Navona isn't far, but will you share our car?"

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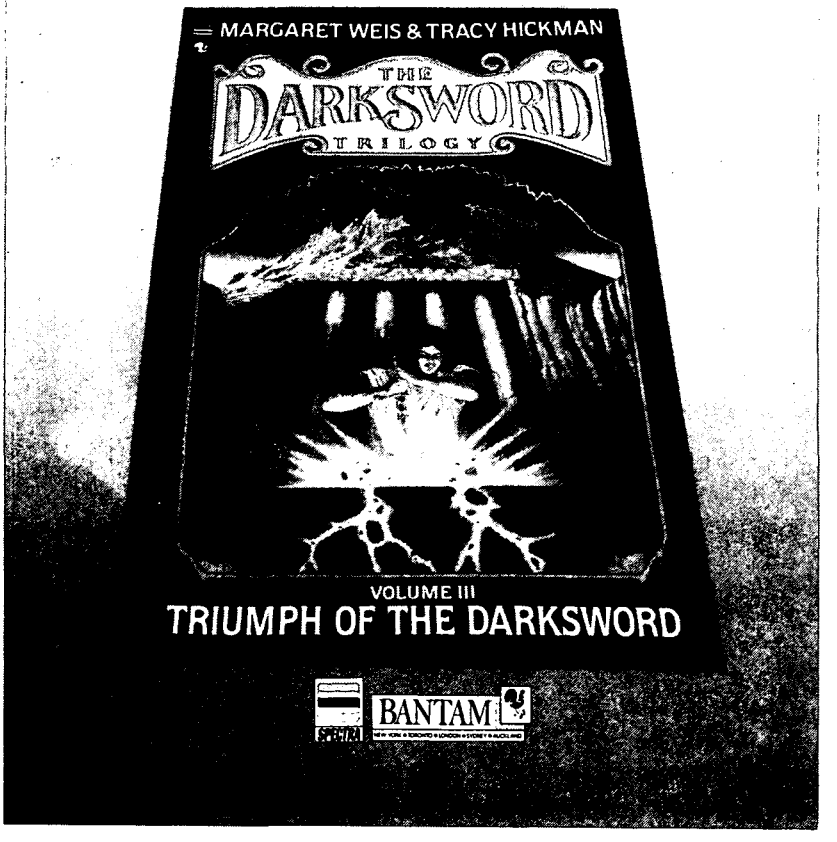

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Surprise that he knew.

"Thank you, I prefer to walk. Alone, to bear the streets in mind. Dressed like this, I'm perfectly safe. A nun owns nothing worth stealing."

"Nothing but knowledge." Olivia's voice slurred. "The knowledge which blesses the streets, so that they aren't forgotten and don't disappear." Her eyes were glassy as if she were drunk, deeply drunk.

The Vatican Press Office had announced that when aliens arrived in St. Peter's Square in three days' time a trio of cardinals would be on hand to greet them: Borromini, Storchi, and Tedesci.

"According to the reservations at *L'Eau Vive* Tedesci and Storchi both lunched there." Lew explained that the former was Vatican Secretary of State, the foreign minister; which made sense. The latter headed the Secretariat for Non-Believers; fine so far. But Borromini, the odd man out, was in charge of the Apostolic Penitentiary.

"That sounds like the Vatican Jail." Olivia's tone was relaxed, as if she owned Tarini's office.

"It handles questions of conscience—"

"It's the Inquisition!"

Tarini shook his head. "No, that's the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith—and it deals with heresy. You got to be a Christian first before you can be a heretic. The Penitentiary covers sorcery, black magic, demons, forces of darkness. Its boss didn't invite the Flies, but he's in on the act when they turn up."

Olivia laughed half-heartedly. "To decide if they're kosher or a spawn of Satan?"

Tarini rubbed his fingers thoughtfully. "The Church isn't simple-minded. Vatican's probably facing a crisis. Do aliens have souls? Is the Church truly universal? Why do Flies home in on Rome?"

"Will they have an audience with the Pope?" chipped in Charles. Tarini was calculating something. . . .

"The Pope's at Castel Gandolfo," said Lew. "His summer palace. That's usual. Got an observatory there. Maybe he's consulting his astronomers."

Tarini dangled a red herring. "Jesuits, those are. Jesuits aren't too popular with the hierarchy. Excessive support for Reds in Latin America."

Charles leaned forward. "This Penitentiary might view a horde of Flies as possible demons?"

"You become an expert on demons, you see demons everywhere." Evasive Tarini.

"There's always the terrible third prophecy of Fatima," said Lew helpfully—to Tarini's annoyance.

"Who's she?" asked Olivia.

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"Not she. A place in Portugal. The virgin appeared to some kids in 1916 and predicted the two world wars—"

"The first one was halfway through in 1916!"

"Yeah well, don't blame me. The third prophecy was locked in the secret archives till the Sixties. Only a pope could read it. The first pope to do so almost fainted with fear, so the story goes. Maybe the prophecy's about aliens. About the Devil infiltrating from the stars." Lew grinned boyishly; the idea was a joke to him.

"Do you believe in a real Devil?" Charles asked Tarini.

"I'm a good Catholic, Carlo. We aren't talking about me."

"Maybe we ought to?" Olivia knit her brow, but Tarini stared back expressionlessly.

If Olivia had been going to explain to Charles about her talent for something else, she must have decided that the time still wasn't ripe. They spent the next couple of days watching Flies watch Rome, while Romans watched the Flies. Two of the resident aliens had flown back to their hive after the reception; they would disgorge, prior to seeing Vatican City.

St. Peter's Square, grand keyhole to Vatican City, was closed to traffic, but how could the heart of the Church be closed to pedestrians? Leaving the embassy car in the Via della Conciliazione, Charles and Olivia and Lew joined a stream of spectators flooding into the square.

This was another hot bright cloudless day, though some wisps of breeze ventilated the city lazily. The entry of aliens into St. Peter's could prove epochal; some revelation might be at hand.

"Oh my God," groaned Lew as they crushed over the white line of the international frontier to encounter—perhaps not chaos but a situation which was as fluid as boiling water.

Were eighty or a hundred thousand people in the piazza already? Romans, countrymen, tourists, nuns and priests, hucksters, pickpockets, what a medley. A pair of Swiss guards in harlequin costumes surveyed the inflow. Olivia, in dark shades, stared at the Switzers: their technicolor tunics, their baggy pants, their boots striped blue and yellow with red flashings, those cute little white ruffle collars, the big slouch berets shading one eye and muffling one ear. The guards were armed with pikes, the perfect medieval weapon.

"Those guys are in charge?" she asked incredulously.

Lew was craning his neck to see beyond the mob, the obelisk, the spuming fountains. TV cameras peered between the baroque statues of saints atop Bernini's colonnade.

"No, there are hundreds of Rome city cops and carabinieri. Crush barriers up front. Ah, I spy the Vatican Vigilance too! The muscle in

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drab blue. I guess there'll be plainclothes cops scattered through the crowd."

"Why are you worried?" asked Charles, as they forged forward, breaking a way through for Olivia.

"Well," said Lew, still peering as he pushed.

"What's wrong, security-wise?" Olivia demanded.

"Just, *hundreds* of police . . . isn't much use. When the Pope appears they station ten thousand cops in this square. What are they playing at? Low profile? What did they expect? News has been out for days. We'll be okay once we get through." Lew tried to sound reassuring.

"Who's pulling punches?" she asked. "City of Rome? Communist mayor, right? Or is this Vigilance of theirs turning a blind eye?"

"I don't know, Miss Mendelssohn. It looks okay, but it isn't."

At that moment a rift opened in the throng through which even Olivia could see ahead to the great façade of the church with Michelangelo's dome rising behind. She gasped and stumbled against Charles, who gripped her arm. She wasn't panicking because she felt like a child in a hectic mob; that wasn't the reason.

"Too much blue sky! Where's the Capitol?"

"In Washington, D.C. Not here," said Lew. "Are you okay, Miss Mendelssohn? A crowd like this could make anyone faint."

What did Olivia mean? Charles held her around the shoulder but she firmed up and thrust ahead, patting at the chiffon headscarf she'd worn in case they needed to enter the basilica.

Behind the guarded steel barriers, amidst a minor retinue of priests and the occasional nun, the three cardinals waited in full pomp though some distance apart from each other, perhaps for security, perhaps politically. Microphones stood planted like bishops' croziers.

The spry, white-haired oldster was Storchi, his particular brief non-Christians and Marxist atheists. Tedesci seemed a jovial bon viveur, to whom gold-rimmed spectacles lent a scholarly air: sanguine scrutineer of menus, men, and monarchs of the world. The youngest cardinal, stout and swarthy with jowls of deepest blue where his scrupulously shaved flesh denied the bursting forth of beard, was Borromini, the connoisseur of darkness. Sister Kathinka waited near him.

Once admitted through the cordon, Lew wandered off to talk UNCO business. Charles and Olivia joined the Dutch nun.

"Will the cardinals bless the aliens?" he asked the nun. From behind her shades Olivia was staring at Borromini lasciviously as if undressing him. Frowning as he gazed at the cloudless sky, the cardinal paid no attention.

Sister Kathinka touched a finger to her lips, kissing silence, amidst the hum and hurly-burly rolling from the waiting crowds. The mob was

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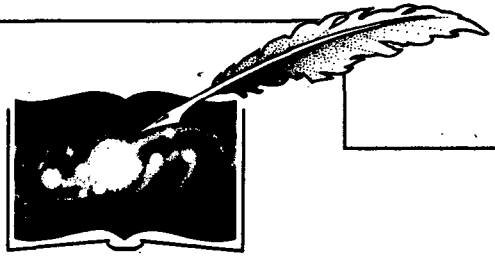

Algis Budrys on
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The Writers of The Future Contest has been extended to September 30, 1988. It's still growing.

WOTF has become a landmark feature of the SF (Speculative Fiction) scene. As founded and planned by L. Ron Hubbard, entry in the Contest is free. It's limited to new authors of science fiction or fantasy who have professionally published no more than three short stories or one novelette. Every three months, a panel of distinguished SF writers names the top three finishers for outright cash grants of $1000, $750 and $500, respectively.

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Please send a stamped self-addressed return envelope of the appropriate size with your manuscript or rules-request.

— Algis Budrys

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oozing tighter against the barriers as the piazza filled behind them, even bulging through and around like hernias of humanity, for the barriers by no means formed an unbroken line across the square. A concerned Swiss guard moved forward, gesturing with his pike as if to stir a pudding. A policeman motioned with his carbine.

"Borromini isn't thinking of blessings." Olivia's voice had slurred. She squirmed as if in that bright sunshine a cold worm had wriggled down her spine. "It's like Dino said: is a Fly a person, a moral intelligence? Could a Fly understand the crucifixion or the virgin birth? Could a Fly become a priest? Could a Fly be martyred and become a saint? If not, then does the Church embrace all? Could a Fly be a cleverly designed temptation? Maybe the Devil, reigning in the frozen empty void which is so like Hell, has at last created a mockery of life . . . these Flies, first demons to dare the daylight. He's ambitious, this Borromini. . . ."

Yes, Charles could see that. Olivia was simply improvising on what Tarini had said, wasn't she?

No, more than that.

"Powerful," she murmured. "He's been ruthless. No Sicilian has been pope for a thousand years. Does believe in actual demons. Yet of honorable conscience. Night of prayer, take this burden from my shoulders. . . ."

Much more!

"Apocalypse creeps close. Imps are out of Hell. Of course Flies show no expressions on their faces, or else we might recognize the evil grin. What if *these* doubts are a temptation—to reject a blessing of communion with alien souls, to circumscribe the Church and lose so many? Disastrous to make wrong decision. Take this burden, night of prayer, give me Your wisdom."

Staring at Olivia, the Dutch nun crossed herself. Olivia relaxed as if she had been stroked by the gesture.

Italian voices cried out. The crowd seethed. In the sky two black flecks of Flies were approaching, high, shadowed at a safe distance by a couple of police helicopters.

Artificial wings a-flutter—steering wings?—both Flies came in to land in the open space, bounding a few paces on their long legs before lowering their little hind legs and furling away those black-membraned wings. How like a pair of devils from a medieval painting of Hell. Borromini's left hand was thrust down by his side, thumb clasping middle and ring fingers, index finger and little finger sticking out. Charles recognized the Manu Cornuta, the "horned hand" sign for warding off the evil eye, familiar to peasants.

While Tedesci, as foreign minister, greeted the Flies in English, his

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voice amplified by microphone and loudspeakers, the aliens stared at the monumental colonnade.

"They must approve," confided Sister Kathinka. "Well ordered columns, each labeled individually with its own statue. That makes them easy to remember, doesn't it? It's like Guilio Camillo's Memory Theatre on a grand, true scale."

"A memory theatre?" repeated Charles.

"Ah, that was a sixteenth century scheme. Camillo built a wooden amphitheater representing the universe as he saw it, full of astrological images and little boxes stuffed with writings about everything under the sun, and beyond. Your orator stood up on stage and, well, Apollo's image would trigger a speech about the sun. That was Camillo's idea." Her right hand fluttered, as if to cross herself. "It was occult. He thought he could exploit the mechanisms of the universe, magically. But the King of France got tired of funding him."

One Fly bobbed up and down; it couldn't see well enough because of all the people. Tides of crowd were spilling around the far edge of the barrier. The Swiss harlequin trotted off to bar the way with his pike.

The other Fly took note of Tedesci.

"Here," it croaked, "is your God focus, yes?" The alien voice rattled from the PA speakers. "It is large. But limited. Your God forgets you, yes? Your God is sick. Remember the world!"

A collective gasp arose, then a noise midway between a groan and the throaty growl of a cat. As Tedesci opened his mouth in simple affront, or about to be diplomatic, that Fly's wings whirred out. It rose ten feet into the air, to hang gazing at the basilica: the columned portico, the loggia windows, the balcony from which popes blessed city and world, those stone giants looking down into the piazza—Christ, John the Baptist, the Apostles. Then the Fly rose much higher to see the drum and cupola of the dome behind, topped by golden ball and cross.

What a mockery of the Ascension, or of the Holy Ghost hovering. People hastily crossed themselves. The crowd's growl deepened. They had seen the aliens landing from the sky like little living helicopters, yet now the levitation of this Fly appeared miraculous. This was a black miracle, something out of the Apocalypse occurring in St. Peter's Piazza. Slowly the Fly drifted high overhead towards the church.

"Basta!" exclaimed Borromini. As he turned to follow its progress, his two flexed fingers stabbed downward in nervous spasm. Or was that a signal?

Pausing, the Fly seemed to lock eyes with the bearded, cross-wielding Christ on the parapet. It sank downward so as to alight on the steps of the church.

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"Bestemmia!" a voice cried in the front of the crowd. Hundreds of other voices took up the call. *"Bestemmia! Bestemmia!"*

Blasphemy. Thousands of voices, a flash fire of fury.

The Roman mob surged. Barriers were climbed, thrust between, circumvented. Men raced to intercept the Fly, to ward it off from entering St. Peter's. Screams, cries, the rattle of gunfire—as surrounded police discharged their weapons into the air. Other police and Vigilance dropped back to form a tighter cordon around the reception party and the other alien, but no one tried to break through to attack it. On the steps the Fly disappeared in a scrum of rioters.

A long thirty seconds after the brawlers reached their target, a flashing white explosion ripped out the heart of the riot on the steps. Bodies, bits of bodies, were hurled out disgustingly. The Fly beside Charles cried out with a noise like a football rattle. Ambulance sirens, police sirens began to wail.

It took a while longer before anyone as close to the basilica as Charles or the cardinals realized the greater horror, the awful mystery of that morning. Already the crowd behind the fountains and the obelisk were pointing, moaning.

An UNCO delegate had been listening to Vatican Radio's English language commentary. Tearing his earplug loose, he turned up the volume on his transistor set.

". . . the cupola of St. Peter's has *vanished.* The dome is sheered off, obliterated. It simply no longer exists. The Church of Rome stands open to the sky!"

Hearing this, Cardinal Borromini sank to his knees and prayed—to be forgiven?

Olivia and Charles spent the afternoon in bed together in his room at the embassy. A good place to work at body language? To begin with they were busy forgetting the morning's events; then they were remembering amidst the rumpled sheets. Charles had shut the drapes across the extremely tall windows, but Roman summer light still filtered through.

"I'm psychic, Charles," she told him. "Mainly I sense shadows of the past, staining a person—just rarely a shadow of the future. When I saw Borromini I saw his shadows. When we talked to the Fly at the reception . . . it was so ordinary, that Fly, that's the main impression I got. Ordinary."

"A regular fly." Charles thought of Martine's brother; and Martine. Was Olivia also crazy? The idea of someone so close to the American President using the Third Eye in matters of security struck him as capricious and unsettling, though not wholly incredible. Had she any influence over actual policy?

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"If insights occur strongly enough—" on the psychic Richter scale! "—I let them guide me. I've always been right. I was right about you and Martine, wasn't I?"

"Mmm," he said. "Does your government know about your psychic gifts?"

"The First Lady knows. She fixed my appointment. A few years back I sketched the shadow of her success. Her husband's future success."

"She was visiting a carnival? You used a crystal ball?"

"No, darling, I was into political projections. Trend analysis. I was damn good at it, and not mainly because of glimpses of the future! Those are rare and fleeting. On that occasion I glimpsed her shadow and mine in conjunction, so I opened up to her. She consults me about who to appoint. I see the shadows of possible scandals, shadows of dark secrets. I did glimpse my own shadow in Rome beside yours. I made arrangements."

So he had been called to Rome because a psychic had glimpsed him in Rome.

"Took a while to discover who you were, Charles. I didn't see you with a name badge pinned to your chest."

She drew her leg across his naked thigh, rotating to face him. It was a short but shapely leg, with no surgical puncture marks. Her thick black pubic hair tickled his flesh, exciting him, reminding him of Martine. Was Olivia massaging him erotically so that faith in her body might persuade him to accept her hidden paranormal parts too?

"We complement each other, Charles, you see." A hand strayed over his belly. "Body speech and the inner eye. Between us we cover both bases."

He held her hand to stop it from straying further as yet. So as not to seem unfriendly he tiptoed a couple of fingers around the palm of her hand. He traced that palm-map in which, for him, there was nothing to be read.

"Was it an alien weapon?" he asked. "Used in retaliation for the death of the Fly? A long-distance precision disintegrator aimed at St. Peter's from the hive off Alexandria, hmm? Does your insight tell you that?"

Her huge eyes stared at him from so close by, and she shook her head.

"Something else. Cosmic, dangerous. I saw that in the shadow of the Fly who survived. It knew. Of course the explosion on the steps was the alien's power pack blowing up when—" She hesitated.

"When Borromini signaled his pious mobsters for a rough and ready exorcism to expel a black devil from the high priest's temple." Charles made the sign he had seen, and explained.

"Ah. Yes. Ambitious Cardinal Archbishop of Palermo, home of the

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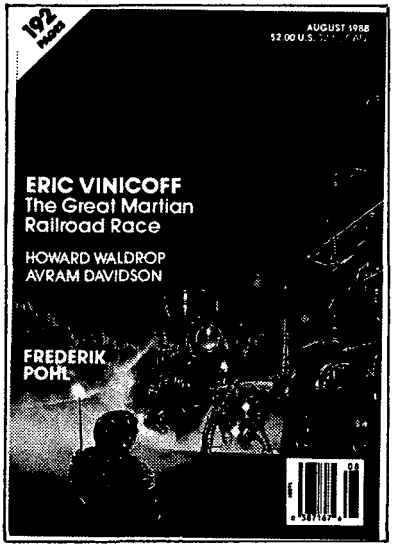

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Mob." She stretched like a cat, rubbing against him, and drew a corner of sheet idly over her crotch as a soft pointer, which also concealed.

He squinted. "You're covering up. Temporizing. I thought we were supposed to be naked to each other."

"I'm not certain about the responsibility for the death."

"It wasn't Borromini, was it? It was Tarini's Mafia contacts. Just like after the war, when Italian Americans liberated Sicily and put all their gangster cousins in charge! They're still around, those cousins. They were trying to tear the Fly's wings off, steal them. Maybe rip the Fly open at the same time, film its entrails with miniature cameras. Bump off the witness, dissect it simultaneously. How neat, how surgical. Did they start the riot or just seize advantage?"

She propped her cheek upon her hand. "I can't swear Tarini was responsible. Not yet. His shadow's remarkably tangled. He's certainly an unscrupulous snake, with shady connections. Just how many scruples ought he to have in his job? Suppose he was up against terrorists? Maybe he didn't intend the Fly to be harmed. Then the power pack blew up. Maybe the attack was spontaneous. Superstitious hysteria. It was too chaotic for me to see."

"Which leaves Borromini?"

"Any mixing with the Mafia would be fatal to his Church career. But . . . he *would* have mobilized the faithful against a demon if that was his diagnosis."

"So it was Tarini."

She sighed. "Yes, I suppose."

"Never mind who. You don't think the Flies used a disintegrator ray?"

"A target vaporized by a laser doesn't vanish as if it never existed. There's smoke and debris."

"So was it a *cosmic ray?* Is that what you sense?"

"I sense you," she murmured, and mounted him, no fused-tailed mermaid now.

Afterwards, Charles walked alone up the Via Veneto to the gardens of the Villa Borghese. On those shady lanes underneath the umbrella pines, by one of those coincidences which aren't, Valeri Osipyan bumped into him.

"A shocking and barbaric crime, eh, Mr. Spark? You must have heard me veto any such violent folly. What happens soon after? Well, the Vatican have radioed their regrets, likewise the Italians. Pah! Fancy having a foreign enclave run by a conspiracy of priests in the middle of your capital city."

"Do you have many spies in the Vatican, Colonel? Do you ever groom a young communist to act Catholic, become a priest, and rise?"

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"Now there's an idea, a red pope! We'd have had to start planning it back in the days of Lenin practically. How many pretend-priests would we have needed to be on the safe side? Enough to prop up the whole East European church!" Osipyan was showing a witty, fanciful side; he was attempting bonding with Charles.

"The Vatican asked what happened to the top of St. Peter's. 'Can we have it back, please?' " The Russian laughed sharply. "Oh, not in so many words. The hive replied, 'Maybe is fortunate more of fine city not lost, since two of us remembering.' Did the aliens use a weapon, I wonder?"

"I can't imagine what sort."

"Ah, so you've been told by someone that it wasn't a weapon! Who would that be? Olivia Mendelssohn, perhaps? She's an odd one. How odd *is* she, incidentally?"

"Cardinal Borromini comes from Mafialand. When the Fly declared that God is sick, he made this sign." Charles imitated the Manu Cornuta. "The sign to banish evil. Swiftly followed by murder."

"You're trying to throw me off the trail—" As if to demonstrate, the Colonel caught Charles's elbow and forced him off the path. However, bicycles were bearing down swiftly and silently. When the riders passed, the two men walked on together as if by agreement.

"Sister Kathinka, the Dutch nun who guides Flies, was a go-between." Charles mentioned *L'Eau Vive*. Would that satisfy Osipyan? He felt an urge to do so. Hell, they were all supposed to be collaborating. Pooling information for the common good. And Osipyan hadn't behaved like Tarini.

Water gleamed ahead. Rowing boats with green canvas half-awnings plied a lake, on the far bank of which amongst trees and bushes a little temple fronted the rippling, sparkling water. With its four-pillared portico and a few statues perched on its roof, the temple looked like a bonsai version of St. Peter's, dwarfed for a prince's back garden.

"An alien who is 'remembering' dies violently," mused the Russian, "and a little part of the city disappears. What did your lover tell you about *that*, Mr. Spark? And how does she know?"

"Do you have bugs in embassy beds?"

"Won't you tell me, for humanity's sake?" Osipyan was smiling as if they were two old friends out for a stroll. The strange thing was that he wasn't dissimulating. Just then, in the Borghese gardens, Charles and Valeri were indeed two old acquaintances enjoying each other's company.

"It would be noble to confide in me. If need be, I could offer asylum. Though it's mad to live in an asylum, isn't it?"

Would Olivia perceive in Charles's shadow how he had snitched on her?

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"Daren't you tell me, Mr. Spark, because there are few secrets from Miss Mendelssohn?" Charles upgraded Osipyan's sensitivity level considerably. "That tells me something, oh yes. In my country we have several such people. They're promising, though erratic. Do you recall the fat old lady who was by my side during the arms talks? And the so-called chess master?" A confidence, indeed! "How perturbing that there is one such in the White House. What did Miss Mendelssohn perceive about the chunk of church vanishing?"

"Cosmic danger," Charles admitted.

"Ah." Osipyan grinned tightly. "A mystic may sense that. That's what is dangerous about mystics when they're in power. We had our Rasputin, with the Czarina in his clutch, and the Czar in hers."

Charles found it hard to envisage Olivia as a female Rasputin to the First Lady. Maybe Osipyan's sense of history was keener than his.

"These days in Russia we try to approach such mystical powers scientifically. I believe in *this* world, don't you?"

Charles nodded. In the world, and the body.

"A country run by mysticism might launch Armageddon against an alien starship if they believed it held an Antichrist. A few hydrogen warheads ought to smash through any force field, right? Pity about the radioactive tidal waves swamping the Nile delta."

"I'm sure nobody's thinking along those lines."

"I'm sure that some Think Tank is running all possible scenarios! Alas, a nuclear attack would destroy all the wonderful alien technology, wouldn't it, Charles?"

Intimacy, from Valeri.

"The Flies mustn't simply go home and rob us of their knowledge, must they? Think Tanks will be spinning spider-webs. Tarini may have had authority for his opportunistic violence." Osipyan thumped his palm with his fist. "Oh why did the Fly have to mention God? Are they no wiser than us?" The Russian seemed genuinely upset.

"Maybe they've been hearing too much from their guides about martyrs, crucifixion, the inquisition, Lord knows what. The pain, the blood. Hell and the Devil. Worse than your Gulags. Maybe Christianity seems sick."

Osipyan brooded. "What does 'God' mean to a Fly? It may mean . . . a power, a force. Yes, a force. Perhaps an extra force in nature, or beneath nature behind the scenes. Our physicists say that atomic particles may 'remember' and be alert to distant events. There might be a universal information field of some sort—with a memory of all previous events in the universe. Naturally I'm interested in information fields. Imagine being able to extract information at a distance!"

Was Osipyan joking?

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"We do that all the time," said Charles. "It's called looking."

"Imagine being able to retrieve information about past events." *(As Olivia did—from her shadows? Aha.)* "Imagine that the cosmos itself has a memory, which is accessible to us. I'm sure you and I could collaborate more rationally than a collaboration with . . . a witch."

Yet not, thought Charles, more delightfully. In the long run he might be wrong on that score. And Olivia was only an on/off witch.

The Colonel hurried off in the direction of the Piazza del Popolo, and Charles returned the way he had come, his mind reeling.

"Carlo! We just heard. The Flies are going to shift the hive."

"To Rome," said Olivia.

"Lake Albano," Tarini corrected her. "That's fifteen miles away. They want water to hover in. Maybe they suck up water for fuel."

Castel Gandolfo was beside Lake Albano, wasn't it? Was it tactful to moor their pyramid opposite the Pope's summer house?

"Vatican has no say," explained Tarini. "It only controls the papal palace and villa. Italian government agrees. Prestige!" Prestige for Tarini too. . . .

Charles still felt a sense of rapport with the Russian. "At least that should rule out any nuclear strikes."

Tarini looked furious. "Don't even *joke*. Who would want to nuke the first aliens ever to visit us?"

"I suppose there wouldn't be many souvenirs left over. But who would want to tear the wings off a Fly?"

"That was hysteria. The thing looked like Beelzebub advancing on St. Peter's. What it said about God, well!"

"Exactly. Are the Flies homing in because they think the Pope's our God-on-Earth?"

"Albano's a crater lake," said Lew. "Castel Gandolfo's high on the rim. His Holiness won't be overlooked much."

Olivia had been shading her eyes as if struggling to see shadows, future-flashes.

"It's because of the dome and the death," she said softly. "The Pope living by that lake is a coincidence. Nearest lake to here, isn't it?"

"Sure," said Lew. "Lake Bracciano's a lot bigger but it's another ten miles. If that bothers creatures who fly to Kyoto and back!"

"What about security?" asked Olivia. "There'll be such crowds around the lake."

"Italian army." Tarini grinned. "UNCO can mount all sorts of snoop equipment round the crater."

Seen on a giant TV monitor at the Farnese Palace, the spectacle of the

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pyramid ship in motion was surreal, like Magritte's flying mountain. The grey mass sailed upright through the air surrounded by a rainbow shimmer as of oil on a sunlit puddle. It slowed, it hovered, it settled. A few hands clapped appreciatively. Most UNCO people stared in silence. They were definitely *the* team now.

"The mountain has come to the Pope," said Osipyan sourly, "since Mohammed wasn't available."

Charles glanced at the Russian and shook his head. Not to the Pope.

A quibbling discussion broke out as to how to monitor the water level.

"We'll use lasers," promised Tarini.

"What if it rains—?"

"You program your computer for rainfall, run-off, evaporation—"

"If the Flies put back what they use—"

"Look, the old Romans built a fugging huge underground tunnel a mile long to regulate the water in Albano. If *they* could work it out—!"

Half of Rome and vicinity was trying to reach Castel Gandolfo, choking all available routes. When the Italian army finished deploying its checkpoints to seal off the area, police could begin to untangle the traffic. A permit system was being introduced, which Charles could well imagine in operation. "*Of course* my cousin's mother-in-law lives in Castel Gandolfo! She's a sick old woman. I must visit her to take a last photograph!" The Vatican announced that it likewise had a right to issue travel permits, to its extraterritorial territory.

Out of the various little "ports" of the pyramid several Flies had already departed to speed towards Venice or Vienna or Bangkok. Others were returning to their relocated base. Tarini produced a graph of the number of Flies on board subsequent to the first exodus. On the assumption that there had been exactly one thousand aliens to begin with, this crew tally could rise as high as a hundred; sometimes the number dipped to ten.

En route to Castel Gandolfo in an Agusta helicopter Tarini remarked that Ciampino airport was having its work cut out controlling air traffic over the Alban Hills.

Olivia warned, "Don't think of staging any mid-air collisions to test their debris deflectors."

"If only we knew!" he enthused. "We could open up the solar system within years. Colonize Mars. The new Renaissance; think of it."

He viewed himself as an unappreciated hero, a Prometheus, a Klaus Fuchs, an Oliver North.

"That's right," said Olivia. "You could become a security chief. On Pluto."

Threats wouldn't deter him. History would vindicate him.

Seen from the air, Castel Gandolfo and surrounding countryside looked

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as busy with humanity as if the Pope had invited eight hundred thousand people and all their relatives to visit; never mind roadblocks. Actually, according to Lew, the hall in the park to the rear of the papal palace, built for mass audiences, could accommodate eight thousand souls. The park was almost empty; it must be shut. Inside that park bulged the Vatican observatory.

The palace fronting the central piazza of the pretty little town—four wings of palace enclosing a courtyard—was modestly stark in contrast with the baroque church which dominated the east side of the square a-buzz with people and vehicles. Lew pointed to the papal villa in the distance, Villa Barberini. A crowded panoramic road circled the crater, dived to the lakeside, and spurred back to a larger town. Trucks and trailers sprouting aerials and dishes were stationed at strategic viewpoints. As the hovering helicopter swung slowly on its axis, rising from the lake they saw the alien pyramid.

This transformed the scene into some Central American or Mexican delirium. Charles imagined not Jesuits but Aztec priests boating out to the pyramid, to climb to the top and tear out human hearts. Such priests would have required grappling irons on long ropes to hook into the ports. Notwithstanding, the mountaineers might have skidded helplessly on that moiré shimmer, that iridescent luster.

"The energy field doesn't stop Flies from passing into the ship." Tarini peered through binoculars. "Wonder if that sheen would flash into action if some intruder tried to get aboard?"

"Disguised as a Fly?" inquired Olivia.

"Yeah, somebody of short stature," he said insensitively. "I guess Flies' limbs are a bit thin to imitate."

"Not to mention them having an extra pair. A dwarf acrobat in a Fly suit? You have got to be joking."

"Maybe there's a recognition signal. None, and you get stunned or fried. Again, maybe not."

The Agusta landed just outside town where a couple of Lancias waited to chauffeur UNCO passengers. Olivia preferred that she and Charles roam on foot.

"I had a flash," she whispered. "I saw us both in the piazza. I'm picking up more of the future than ever before."

The Piazza del Plebiscito was packed. Queues stretched from cafés. Hucksters hawked souvenirs. Ice cream vendors pumped out cones. Here was the world and his wife, and his celibate brother and sister of the Church, and his military cousin. A couple of Swiss Guard commissionaires stood guard outside the summer palace.

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And out of its entrance walked Cardinal Borromini dressed in a simple black cassock plus scarlet skullcap. At his side, Sister Kathinka.

Cloaked by crowd, Olivia and Charles followed them to the church, hung around a while, then entered.

After the bustle and brightness what a contrast was this cool, dim, quiet cavern. The ceiling was coffered with recessed stucco panels. Candles burned high and low in front of shrines. A few black-clad village women were sunk in prayer. Olivia pointed at the big black box of a confessional, its curtains closed. A pair of black shoes peeped beneath the side drape. She and Charles sat on nearby chairs to wait.

Eventually the Dutch nun emerged and went to pray by the altar. By the time she arose, composed, Cardinal Borromini was waiting for her in the aisle.

Olivia stared, glassy-eyed. "Her shadow's *inside* the pyramid," she slurred—and leapt up to intercept the two of them. Charles hastened to accompany her.

"Wait, we must talk!"

Borromini glowered. "Do not disturb the house of God, or us," he said in thickly-accented English. He would need to polish his foreign languages a little if he hoped to be pope, the pope who converted—or damned—the stars.

"You've been invited inside the alien ship." (Kathinka's eyes widened.) "You haven't told UNCO!"

"The sister is no part of your UNCO. Did you hide a microphone in the confessional? Basta! This is a disgrace."

"I know because I see the truth, the way a saint sees a vision."

"You dare compare your spying to the vision of a saint?" Yet Borromini was rattled. More so, when Charles made the sign of the Manu Cornuta.

After some consideration the cardinal said, "How remarkable that the aliens invite a religious to enter their hive, instead of a diplomat or scientist. A religious of low rank, who may be vulnerable."

Sister Kathinka cleared her throat.

"Yes! Speak!"

"This invitation is simply because of my method of memory, I think."

Borromini gazed around. "This church . . . is dedicated to a saint you two probably have not heard of. Thomas of Villanova. Thomas always aided the poor before their needs became urgent, so that he should not feel pride in his charity."

"So you discussed the sin of pride in the confessional," said Olivia.

"I am vowed not to say! Surely you realize that!"

"Cardinal, Your Eminence, we really can't have the sole representative of the human race ever to enter an alien starship being chained by vows of silence and obedience. Surely *you* realize?"

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"I am not chained," protested Kathinka. "If so, my chain is my freedom."

"As Archbishop of Valencia," continued Borromini, "Saint Thomas was responsible for the care of many Moors whose conversion to Christianity had been less than voluntary. Their state of mind worried him. It was an *alien* state of soul."

"Is Thomas the patron saint of memory too, by any chance?" asked Charles.

Kathinka spoke without thinking. "On the contrary, he was notoriously forgetful!" She gripped her rosary.

"It's blasphemy to forget wilfully," Charles said. "In my book."

"After your visit," breathed Olivia, "you'll return to Vatican territory, to the Pope's palace—where you may be required to stay forever alone in a cell, if the Flies are found to be corrupting."

Kathinka's eye twitched; Charles knew that Olivia had seen the shadow hanging over her. He pressed the nun.

"You imagine that you'd accept the sacrifice obediently, even though it devastates your heart."

"Worse than spies!" hissed Borromini.

"You'd have to give up all your places in Rome, Sister."

"I could live in those in memory." Kathinka's voice shook.

"Do you really think so? All the churches, palaces, streets: could you really live in those solidly and authentically in your imagination? Every color, every detail? Every sight and sound and smell? For the rest of your life—spent in solitary confinement? Today, dear cell, we shall pretend to walk to the Trevi fountain. . . . Why should you even wish to live in those places in memory, Sister, when you would have no one to guide and to bless?"

It was as though Charles had struck the nun in the stomach. He felt a hollow in himself too, of sadness at what he had said. Yet he carried on.

"I want to go with you to the hive. I too know something of memory. If you ask, the Flies may agree."

"Foulness," said Borromini, though not with full heart. Hard to tell whether he was referring to Charles and Olivia or to the aliens.

"If you refuse," Olivia said to the cardinal, "who knows if the sister will reach the pyramid, or only someone dressed as a nun resembling her? I know someone who would love to intercept a helicopter or a boat, or even a Fly carrying her in its arms. You'd have lost your chance, the Church's chance."

Borromini chewed his lip, and took an apparent decision to mellow.

"Perhaps you should both accompany the sister, if only as devil's advocates."

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"Oh no. Once on Vatican territory you might give an order to some burly priests. We might disappear. Charles will go. I shall stay with UNCO, for security."

"I'm sorry if I distressed you," Charles told Kathinka.

"Distress her, *you?*" echoed Borromini. "She has to go inside a hive of alien creatures for who knows what purpose of theirs!"

"But not alone now," Charles said.

Kathinka looked pitying. "I have resources . . . which you might envy if you knew them. God, I mean, not myself. Anyway, I have spent days with aliens."

"You have not been into their *nest,*" the cardinal reminded her. (Be not proud.)

"At home they float in a thousand tanks," Charles mentioned. "The hive may seem like a giant aquarium."

"Is that another vision of yours, fellow?"

"I don't have visions, I just use my eyes. An alien told me about those tanks."

"Ah, really? You may be a help to Sister Kathinka. Perhaps it's best this way. I agree, I concede. Come along with us . . . my son."

So they left the church of the charitable amnesiac. Olivia slipped away quickly through the crowd.

And now at last Charles knew, as he floated in the alien null-sense tank seeing a memory place: Paris.

Here was Montmartre Cemetery, its mausoleums crowding shoulder to shoulder, each of them extravagant, unique, decrepit: high, narrow, one-room houses in honor of Monsieur and Madame Bourgeois, so many nineteenth century telephone kiosks equipped with prie-dieu for making a call to God, and with dusty porcelain flowers behind iron grilles or stained panes. . . .

As Charles drifted upwards, so the cemetery became a relief map of itself, bumpy with all the sepulchres. Over the rooftops beyond, the white dome of Sacré Coeur commanded from its hilltop. Elsewhere, amputated streets led to a wall of nothingness. Most of Paris hadn't been remembered yet, disgorged yet.

He shut his eyes. Or were his eyes still open? Yes or no, this made no difference to the memory place, a circuit board in three dimensions with no data programed into it as yet—no topics had yet been attached to any of the places.

When the Flies returned to their home world with their harvest of a thousand or ten thousand places, aliens afloat in other null-sense tanks would stroll the boulevards of Paris, beginning to fill them with topics bit by bit, brick by brick. *Les mouches* would catch a bateau-mouche

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along the Seine, where fuzzy Impressionist water would flow. Water was too mobile to remember clearly, or to attach ideas to. The foliage of the trees in the cemetery was likewise merely a fractal pattern, although every detail of each graveyard gazebo was true, every tile in distant roofs of the empty part-city was exact. . . .

There had been no *bon voyage* from the Pope, as Charles had slightly been hoping. Borromini had quickly put him and Kathinka in the care of two members of the Vigilance, who had escorted them to a far corner of the papal grounds. He never knew exactly how the arrangement had been made, but some brief signal was radioed and an alien soon arrived carrying a spare flying pack. It agreed to return for another. Meanwhile Charles was lent a black soutane, so as to somewhat resemble a Fly.

Thus equipped, he and Kathinka were autopiloted by the alien the short distance to the pyramid: two black-clad angels. UNCO would hardly have been fooled, yet the strategem had an appealing blatancy to it. A new Saint Joseph of Copertino, the gawping levitating friar, accompanied by the Flying Nun! Could Tarini, forewarned, have actually intercepted Kathinka by deploying jet-pack special forces or a chopper trawler armed with a net? Perhaps.

Once on board: so many tanks, connected by pearly struts and tubes and pipes and ceramic ladders and walkways, like big black beads slung in a dense array. The sloping pyramid walls cast a nacreous phosphorescent light. Deep down, alien machines purred softly. . . .

In the null-sense tank, Charles shivered at the memory . . . of how half a dozen Flies, their arms like steel, had seized him and Kathinka and plucked the clothes from them. He'd been plunged into the slimy-slick liquid of the tank, gluey tendrils pervading the fluid—to be drowned? Certainly to be robbed of sensation, shut in a black coffin almost brimful of liquid.

However, he'd floated as if in the Dead Sea. As the lid locked out the light—his panicky hyperventilation producing rowdy snores, which quieted as his hearing failed—a memory place had appeared, enchanting him.

That had been Cairo's Citadel area. Presently he noticed a Fly kissing a highly decorated mosque wall, a section of arabesque, its moustache feelers twitching ecstatically. When Charles kissed that same place, knowledge arrived, a twisted dreamlike partial knowledge about the alien *purpose* and the lay-out of the ship, its index: the web of tanks above and below, and deepest of all the big tank containing the Gland, a black bloated mass with several eyes, beaked mouth, orifices, no limbs. The Gland.

A glimpse of the purpose; and of the danger.

Later, he'd drifted—steered himself—through the wall of nothingness

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around Cairo, first into San Francisco, and now Montmartre. Here were memory places indeed. All the cities of the world were being made into perfect memory places; more than mere memory places, places congruent with reality.

How long had he been floating in the tank? He'd lost track. Realizing what he could do, he urged his invisible and unfelt hand to rise—not the hand of his body image which hovered above the cemetery, but the hand of flesh he had lost touch with.

The lid above his head rose easily, and the pyramid's light abolished Paris.

With care he hauled himself up. Sensation flooded back as the slithery liquid slid from him like a sheath. If a Fly had been perching on the lid earlier on, now the only alien in sight was sitting propped against the side of a tank, its long legs drawn up like a grasshopper's.

Charles stepped out on to the Flywalk where the borrowed soutane and his undergarments lay heaped. His skin felt vibrant, massaged; mild hilarity welled in him as he dressed.

He waited, unconcerned about time—which seemed his to control, to speed up or slow down—till another tank top opened nearby and Kathinka too stood up.

The nun, naked. He glanced, then averted his gaze, then glanced again. Except for her rather tanned face she was as white as a nude painted by Lucas Cranach, a medieval ideal of blanchedness. He noted the same narrow hips as on a Cranach canvas and the same high white breasts, round white fruit—lychees the size of little apples. However, she was taller and lankier than a Cranach nude, her white legs more muscular thanks to all those ballet exercises.

She was beautiful, yet she no more conformed to present-day images of beauty than did the stumpy sensuality of Olivia. He was the first man to *see* Kathinka. Earlier, when they were forcibly disrobed, panic had possessed him. Now her body spoke to him—the word "inaccessible"! If another person's body usually formed an image within him which he understood all too well, if he had always seen in a body what he already knew, then how could he be excited? To touch that person would merely be to fondle himself; he wouldn't be shocked into some other zone, of displacement, of ecstasy. Yet Kathinka displaced him; as Olivia had, as Martine had. Charles shut his eyes, not so much to allow Kathinka privacy as to see if she was fixed in memory, sculpted in marble. His mind's eye betrayed him, as perhaps it must. A tall white blancmange swayed there. When he looked, she had resumed her habit in haste.

Her eyes shone. She licked her lips.

"They remember so much more deeply! They aren't remembering places for the sake of *places*. Whole cities are their rosaries to hang other

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memories upon. What a Godlike memory. Beyond ordinary memory. The memory that God has of Creation: they've trespassed upon this . . . this divine attribute to use it as a filing system!" Her eyes shone on account of shock. "They're . . . clerks, that's what. Together with their Gland they have power, don't they? Power of miracles. They could be locusts, these clerks. They could consume the actual places if their power went astray."

In her way she was right. The Flies, together with their Gland, had access not to a "God" exactly but to the universal information force, the metamemory of the universe; to some dimension which was the foundation of reality. The Flies tapped a force that underpinned reality, that kept reality constant. Memory was the source of all identity, the only link in a flux of perceptions and events—not only for living beings but for the physical universe as well. The memory of the Flies was so intense. . . .

"They're sick," Charles said bluntly. "Obsessional. Over-developed in one direction. Crazy."

Wasn't that true of himself? Oh no! He had studiously avoided the hot tub into which his talent could have plunged him, melting away the barrier between himself and others, dissolving his identity. So as to anchor himself he had striven to remember places, the scenery of his life. Flies remembered reality so strongly that reality could become the victim of their thoughts; except that they were only, yes, clerks, simple filing clerks cataloging their alien facts upon the faces of objects remembered, collecting new places like blank file cards. When that Fly had been murdered, though, St. Peter's dome had disappeared. Their power leaked out; it had affected Olivia. Their power had given her those extra flashes of perception, of information about the future. . . .

"Miracles without faith!" exclaimed Kathinka. "Heaven, cities of God, built by the clerks of Hell. Worse, by the clerks of nowhere."

"Sooner they go home the better, eh? Leaving us to our own world and our arms talks and ordinary beliefs and dangers. Most of what we're saying about them is . . . *words*. Memory, supermemory: what do we know of those? The Flies assume we're a version of themselves, building churches in order to remember facts! They aren't a version of us any more than a whale's aversion of a person."

"If we don't share . . . a communion with them, if we can't share, if they're neither of God nor of the Devil—" she began.

The soft humming of the pyramid was drowned by an eruption of engine roar, the thrash of helicopter blades, clatter of metal. An aluminum ladder jutted through one of the ports, a horizontal bridge. Through others too, to judge by the noise. Human shouts of: "Go, go, go!" A masked commando armed with a riot gun scrambled monkey-style,

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leaped on to the Flywalk. The sheen didn't flash him to ashes. Another commando followed.

The sharers had arrived.

"A totally peaceful occupation." Smirking Tarini might have been offering a job description.

"Seizure, you mean!" retorted Charles. Tarini had come into the pyramid as soon as it was reported secured, and the few Flies on board immobilized. Improvised mesh gates covered all the ports now, since no one knew how to close those otherwise. Already Flies, returning to disgorge, were circling or hovering outside, barred from entering. Since they did nothing hostile, no one interfered with them.

"No casualties, Carlo. We have us a starship." Who was "us" exactly? UNCO? NATO? CIA? ABCDE?

"A ship powered by a paranormal Gland," said Charles.

"Powered by *what*?"

A dispute broke out at the nearest port of access. Only briefly; within moments Olivia had joined them. Ignoring Tarini, she stared at Charles. She stared at the shadow of his time in the tank; then stared at the nun.

She giggled momentarily, madly. "Lecher," she said to Charles. "You don't want me, you want a nun, for fuck's sake? You need your Martine to bail you out of this mess because she's nuts. Oh fuck it, it's the glands, isn't it? It's always the glands." She held her head. "Yeah, vision *is* stronger in here, near the Gland. Let's go see the Gland. I want to see its shadows! Then we might know what sort of shit we're in, thanks to you, Dino Fuchs Prometheus."

Pardon the outburst. Olivia was half spaced out by the vibes in the hive.

Tarini gaped at her. "Dino fucks Prometheus?"

"Yeah, you fuck Prometheus in your head. Wanna steal fire! Wanna fly to Jupiter! On the back of a vulture that'll tear our guts out!"

One of the immobilized Flies called out:

"We take passenger, if wish . . . journey in memory sleep with Gland . ... if halt your bad attack, bad for your cities."

"Are you threatening us?" Tarini demanded. "What with? Your ship's been taken, Fly! We're in charge."

"The Gland's in charge," said Kathinka.

"What's with this gland? Is that the power source: a living one? A queen-alien? Well, everything alive wishes to survive! Where is it?"

"Down below in the big tank," said Charles.

"If us do not dis-charge, into the Gland—"

"Shut up!"

* * *

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Black. Soft. Bulky like a dugong or a walrus. Eyes that saw . . . what, in darkness? Not true eyes but organs evolved for another purpose? Afloat in its own secretions, which flowed through pipes to other tanks. Breath sighing. Shadows crawled inside the opened tank.

How to describe shadows to those who hadn't seen them? As photographic negatives perhaps, occupying the same space as a more recent picture. Double exposure, black and white. Image of ghosts. Here were alien shadows. Capacity to see them, strongest here.

Ever since I shouted my way on board—make way for the President's personal representative!—I'd been ever more transfigured by past-knowledge, of Kathinka, Tarini, especially of Charles, all of his past life pictured in the biographic aura of his shadows as if he were a memory place himself.

A human being has to avoid the hot tub, the melting, or else all compass direction is lost. That's how we evolved, separate from each other, seeking clues to the feelings of others but not dissolving into them—unlike the Flies.

Humans need a single viewpoint, not a faceted mosaic vision. For my viewpoint I chose Charles, because I saw him deepest of all. To illuminate the story, I chose his eyes, his voice, his desires.

Shadows crawled inside the tank of the Gland. . . .

Once long ago the Flies' ancestors marked their surroundings with scent messages. New experiences were encoded into molecules, and unless these were unloaded a Fly could forget nothing, a Fly's experience did not fade. Everything it experienced remained fully present: in an expanding, continuous, immediate present which swelled to capacity, unless discharged on to rocks, paths, stems of vegetation, where presently it would fade away.

Encountering all these messages, other Flies experienced their fellows' lives almost as intensely as their own. Each participated in a swathe of lives. Flies were almost a collective intelligence. The larger, rarer, immobile females wallowed in pools of their own secretions which alone could fix—stabilize—the discharged memory molecules contributed by the visiting, roaming Flies. In these pools the young were nurtured, learning what it was to be a Fly.

As this gestalt of minds grew more complex through interaction, a confusion of the senses developed. What a Fly smelled and tasted, it saw and heard. What it saw, it also tasted. A Fly might be overwhelmed by the immediacy of experiences which hadn't happened to it personally.

The females, the Glands, discovered disciplines, sorting procedures. They prescribed a way to re-arrange the natural world so that it was no longer a set of chaotic memories. Thus the Flies began to build orderly

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walls, structures, towns—with a pool at the center of each town where the memory of the town itself persisted, organized knowledge coded into its remembered pattern. A town was thought, thought was a town. Civilization evolved.

And the Glands, the hearts of the faceted gestalts, broke through to metamemory, to the information fields underlying the whole of reality. Towns, cities, and the image of those cities with information encoded into their every part, became truly congruent in superspace. . . .

Those were the shadows that I saw, on the Gland in its tank; to the extent that I could understand them. And insight exiled me forever.

There isn't much more to tell.

Oh yes.

"Sir, downtown Prague has disappeared!"

"It *what?*"

"General Dole says it vanished. There's nothing there, just a flat empty space. It disappeared like the dome!"

A Fly, excluded from its hive, had fallen into Lake Albano. Or else it had dived deliberately. Overloaded with memory, it overloaded its power pack. In turn, transposed through superspace, what it remembered was obliterated, wiped out.

A few other places—old Mombasa, Ghent, the heart of New Orleans—had to be lost before Tarini was ordered to evacuate the pyramid and let the Flies back in to disgorge.

After that, the aliens carried on as previously, flying to and fro, remembering the world's cities. These crazy, para-powerful aliens were now protected even more scrupulously by security teams. They stayed on Earth another year—for me a stressful year, during which I stayed as isolated as my job allowed. I was too good at it now; it would consume me. Even with a whole ocean separating me from the hive, I could be melted—into other people.

As to the nature of their technology which both alerted them to our existence then let them leap the light years to reach us, perhaps that too was a science of memory—by virtue of their sharehold in superspace where all events are recorded, dispersed throughout as in a hologram, then by an act of wilfully "forgetting" the distance from their home world—rather than any manipulation of a repulsive hyperforce (though they may have that too).

Yet a passenger to the stars, to their home world, to see for oneself? If a human could perceive reality as they perceived it! That offer still stood, though it transpired that the offer was only open to those most directly involved in the affair.

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Obviously a human being must fly to the stars, even on a one-way ticket with no means of sending a postcard home—if only for the sake of knowing that the journey had been undertaken.

So who should it be?

Charles? Ah no. New Orleans had vanished, and he must meet Martine again. Now that he'd known crazy aliens, perhaps he could begin to know her heart more exactly. He could enter the house of madness alert to all the signs inscribed there, and perhaps could show her the exit door, the way by which she could melt into one whole person.

Kathinka, then?—who might be canonized in a thousand years' time for her sacrifice? No, she would be destroyed, her faith broken. Faith is a belief in a hidden superperson. Flies needed no such belief when they were already part of a superperson, with a supermemory that was rooted into a dimension outside spacetime. Light years from Rome, Kathinka might revisit the domeless Vatican in a memory tank any time she chose, yet a visit to St. Peter's would tell her only, and compellingly, about the folkways of faithless Flies inscribed upon it—as they relieved the pressures of memory upon the fresh empty places of Earth.

Tarini? Ha! Exiled to an alien star out of harm's way, the failed Prometheus of espionage? He was better off demoted to Honduras.

No, me. Olivia.

For I'd lost my human compass point. On Earth I would melt, which meant that I would be mad like Martine, only more so, the many-in-one. My needle now only pointed away, away, where at least my neighbors would be somewhat like me. And unlike me, utterly, so that I could remain myself.

Me, Olivia, dreaming this story now in memory in the Gland's tank, to which all other ship-tanks connect, attaching this narrative as I've been taught to the ruins of the Colosseum, stone by stone, section by section, so that it can be played out in that memory theater, unforgettably.

Though how will its future readers, aliens, understand it? ●

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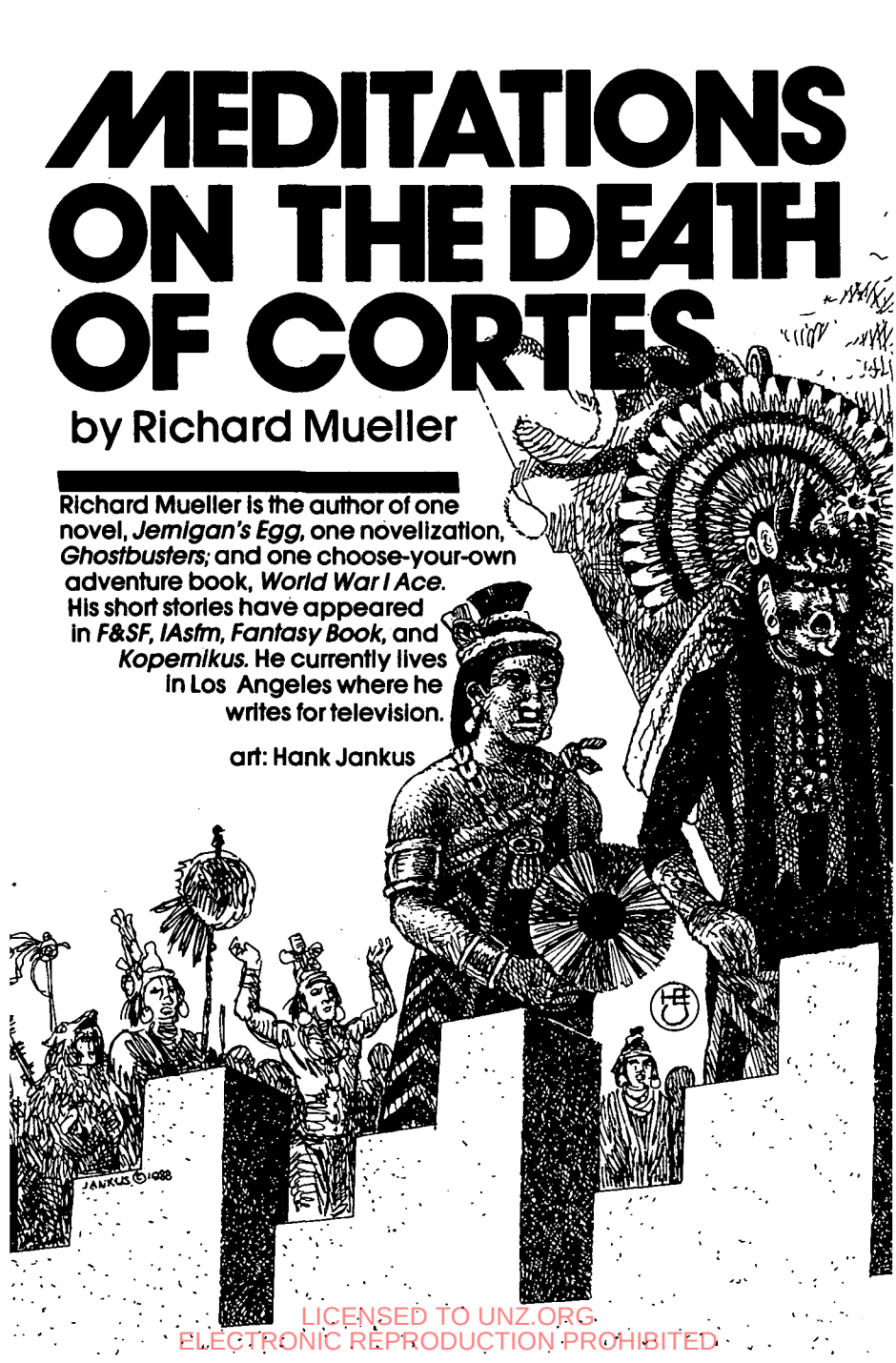
MEDITATIONS ON THE DEATH OF CORTES

by Richard Mueller

Richard Mueller is the author of one novel, *Jemigan's Egg*, one novelization, *Ghostbusters*; and one choose-your-own adventure book, *World War I Ace*. His short stories have appeared in *F&SF*, *IAsfm*, *Fantasy Book*, and *Kopernikus*. He currently lives in Los Angeles where he writes for television.

art: Hank Jankus



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The life of a junior consul is not easy. I am Third Secretary to the embassy, and, apart from organizing transportation, keeping the Ambassador's calender, responsibility for the Radio Room, and my duties as Acting Commercial Attache and Liaison to our nationals in Cuba and the so-called People's Islands, I also have the lion's share of briefing the old man and keeping him up to date on the latest intelligence concerning the upcoming negotiations. Therefore it was with no great enthusiasm that I greeted Davey Anderby.

Anderby is a commercial traveler in railway equipment and foundry products for the great mills at Caerdiff. This provides a useful cover for his true duties, for Davey Anderby is a spy. He travels about the Caribbean, attempting to sell locomotives to people who don't need them, and picking up tidbits of information, which he passes on to me, and which I pass on to the Ambassador. Then, if the Ambassador deems them suitable, I encode them and send them home on the Atlantic cable. All quite routine and, I'm sure, no secret to anyone. Sooner or later the Cubans or their masters will find the relationship disadvantageous, and I shall be given forty-eight hours to leave. That is one of the privileges of having diplomatic immunity. Davey is not so gifted and runs a greater risk.

"Yeah. One of these days the Eagle Police'll track me down and dig my heart out with a spoon." He smiled as he opened his case full of brochures. "Certainly simplify your job, won't it?"

"Don't talk like that," I said. "I do feel responsible for you. Brandy?"

"Yes, thanks." He accepted the drink, took a sip, savored it. "Now that's liquor. Better than that swill they peddle around here, though there is a nasty yellow potion you can buy over in Maricopa. . . . Pardon?"

I looked at him. "I didn't say anything."

"I know you didn't. It's just that you usually interrupt me at this point, bring me politely round to the reason for my visit, collect the goods, and send me on my way."

He smirked, enjoying my discomfort. He knows the gulf between us and doesn't like it, but I didn't create the class system and I'm damned if I'll take responsibility for it.

"Very well. What do you have for me?"

Anderby chuckled indulgently. "That's the ticket. That's the Civil Service we've all come to know and love." He fished a slim volume out of his pocket and placed it carefully on my desk. I ignored his jibe and picked it up.

"What is it?" I asked, turning it over in my hands.

"Read it," he said simply. "Read it and weep, or whatever you people do. It's the source. It's the reason for it all. How they *do* it. Our history, and theirs. A lot of good people died to smuggle it out of a library in

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Cuzco and across the isthmus, and they died to no purpose because it's not going to change a thing."

He gathered up his case and started toward the door.

"Your pick-up . . ." I began, but he turned and gave me such a look of contempt that I was struck dumb. Then the look changed to one of pity, and for the first time in our relationship, I was afraid.

"Yeah, I know," he said. "The girl's got my money downstairs. You know, Squire, I got into this job because I wanted to *know*. But after reading that, I don't see the point any more. Take care of yourself."

And he was gone.

I picked up the little book . . .

A Memoir

It was in the waning of the Year of the Eagle God's Return or, measured in their terms, 1519 in the Year of their Lord. (I have a passion for the statistics of interconnection.) Distracted (some would say obsessed—some would say that the old man is crazy) by my work, I had totally missed the Harvest Festival. Young Squire Small Dogs, my protege and valued assistant—when his mind was upon the work, being in that regard far more of a generalist than I—bearded me, saying that if I insisted upon ignoring the gods, I would find myself as the subject/recipient of an interesting lesson on exploratory surgery in their behalf. Well, it is ours to laugh. As scientists, we would be the last sacrificed. Even the Squire ranks with a Provisional Adjudicator in importance, and to ascend The Great Pyramid I should have to make a rare blunder indeed. I am not being irreligious when I say that our crops depend as much upon agronomy as upon augury, and the Blessings of the Wind Lord or the Spring Rains Sisters, or any of a dozen such tutelary dieties that war for the farmers' attention. The priests know this. No edict disrupts our gathering of test specimens, gumsap, plant samplings, or any of a hundred other items. It would take a great cataclysm indeed to interfere with our work.

A great cataclysm.

In truth, a great cataclysm he was, this incarnate Quetzalcoatl, this pale, bearded Cortes. We had been hearing, even here to the south in the Land Between the Seas, of his approach to the Mexica. I do not know what possessed me to assume that I would not be affected. Wishful thinking, no doubt.

Cane-Borer came to us on the afternoon of the Seventh Cycle Day with the news that two priests and their retainers awaited my presence on the landing of the museum level, and that among the retainers were two Mexicans. Cane-Borer was quite observant, even for a boy his age. He

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stood calmly, waiting for my lash, knowing my temperament and that I would probably not give it. Cane-Borer would have had a great future at Court, if science had not been his venue.

"Mexicans, you say?" The pup nodded. Small Dogs approached, his hands held protectively within their gum gloves. His layered cotton mask showed no emotion but his eyes were merry with smugness. That was the Squire's way. Anything that discomfited me or our schedule in any way he took great pleasure in. Annoying yes, but a good scientist for all that.

"And why are they here, you scuttling weevil?"

"By my Heart, I know not, nor would they speak to one such as I."

Small Dogs tugged down his mask. "By your Heart? I can arrange that, if you wish to present that organ to the Eagle God. Perhaps a walk up the long stairs would teach you manners. Be gone, Spore!"

Cane-Borer was off and running, a giggle belying his feigned terror. Small Dogs peeled off his gloves.

"Do you wish my presence?" he said thoughtfully. I confess that I looked at him with some surprise.

"You are very solemn, Squire. Do you know something that I do not?"

"I have been expecting it," he replied. "He is the Lord of the Winds. I was afraid that we would be drawn into this. Now it has come."

For a scientist Small Dogs was too superstitious by half. "If it disturbs you, I shall go alone."

"It disturbs me greatly. You shall not go alone."

The priests were Jade Knife and Elbows Bloody, both known to me. They were dressed for ceremony; wearing the Robes of State and Ritual, their best mantles, hair freshly woven and dipped. Unlike the Mexican priests, ours at least bathed. Jade Knife, as always aloof, his low opinion of our science showing in his cold eye, nodded shortly to me. Elbows Bloody, a far more friendly sort, bowed an apology.

"Forgive us, My Lord Dry Rivers Falling, for interrupting your labors, but we come on an urgent errand of State." Squire Small Dogs and I both bowed our acknowledgment of the importance of our nation, but Jade Knife barked up impatiently.

"Can we get on with this?"

"As you wish," I replied. Jade Knife could scarcely interfere with our work directly, but he might manage to siphon off Cane-Borer, Many Winds, or some of the others for temple cleaning, and shake our schedules about. Best to treat him with a soft hand.

"Lord," Small Dogs whispered. He had stiffened and was positively pale. I followed his gaze and saw, in the rear rank, in close conclave with the two Mexicans, the one known only as Obsidian, War-Marshal of All

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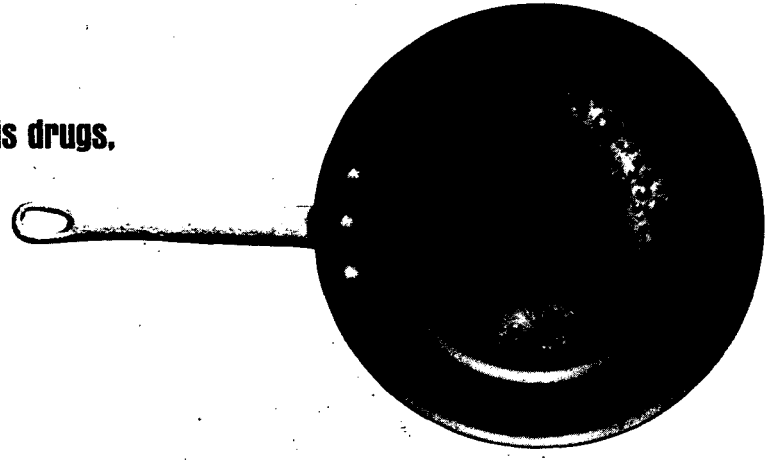
This is your brain.

this is drugs.



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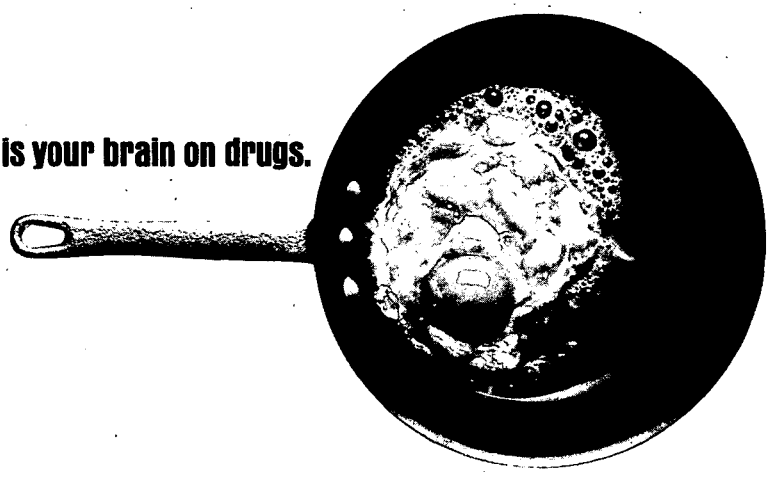

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Armies. Small Dogs was right. This was serious. But I had to maintain composure. I pretended not to notice, meditating on the Virtue of Holy Erosion.

"Yes, Intercessor. Our establishment is at the disposal of the Gods and the State." I smiled thinly, rewarded by a scowl from Jade Knife. There is no pleasing some people.

"The Marshal wishes to speak with you."

"I see His Eminence."

"You have a private chamber?"

"Many. Come with us, please."

Jade Knife's eyes narrowed angrily. "I am not to be included in these discussions," he said sharply.

"Ah, another time perhaps."

I led the way to a secure office, aware that my flippancy with Jade Knife could cost me dearly at some later date, in whatever way the Intercessor could manage. Somehow, knowing the cost made it more enjoyable.

We were five: Small Dogs, myself, the High Marshal, and the two Mexicans. We took seats around a dense wood table and, without preamble, one of the Mexicans unrolled a map. He was about to speak when the War-Marshal leaned forward.

"Lord Dry Rivers Falling, it is an honor."

I was surprised at this deference but again kept my presence of mind. "The honor is my own. How may we assist you?"

"How? You have heard of the appearance of the Wind Lord and his host?"

I nodded. I glanced at the Mexicans, who were waiting patiently.

"He has landed *here*," Obsidian said, touching the map at a spot on the eastern coast unknown to me, save that it was swampy and a landfall near the old Totonac Empire. "He is marching on The City of Lakes."

Small Dogs and I were speechless. The Lord of Winds was a god, or so the prophecies had declared. He could go where he wished. Sensing that Small Dogs was about to say something stupid, I broke in. "How does this affect us, Marshal?"

Obsidian smiled, an expression of genuine warmth, and at that moment I decided that I liked this man of fearsome reputation. He had scourged the battlefields of surrounding enemies, and had even held our lines against the more numerous Mexicans. He was a legend of unparalleled ferocity, yet at this moment we were alike; two old men with a common problem. Only I did not yet know what it was.

"Scientist," he said respectfully. "The Mexicans have asked the Maya

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for assistance. It has been decided, for reasons of State, to grant this assistance."

"The Winds . . ." I started to say, but Obsidian cut me off.

"One of them, yes. It has been decided to use The Wind of Red Lungs against the Wind Lord."

"This is insane," Small Dogs grumbled, as we labored up the lower slopes of The Green Sleeping Man toward the border post on its southern shoulder, the steepness of the gradient making our palanquins useless.

"I don't like to travel either . . ."

"No! Using the Winds upon the Wind Lord himself." I am not a big man but I mustered up a powerful strength and pulled the Squire from the line of march.

"Listen, Goat-pizzel! Not everyone in this column knows what we're up to. I'd like to keep it that way. If there's a Totonac or Tlaxcalan spy in the column, I'm sure you'd love to tell them, have them prepare a proper reception. A flaying perhaps, or some of that ceremonial surgery you keep on about."

Small Dogs nodded and dropped his voice. "Very well, your pardon. But the question. Don't you see the blasphemy we may be marching into?"

I had considered, but with War-Marshal Obsidian at the head of the column, and the convoy top-heavy with priests and stone-slaves, I did not think it politic to bring it up. "I see, but, until I know differently, this Wind Lord from the Land of the Two is merely Cortes, a man, at the head of an invading army. If we are ordered to defeat him, we will try, and if we can, we will. Or would you wish to tell Marshal Obsidian that we are doing the wrong thing?"

"No, but I wish to record my objections," he stammered, trying to look as dignified as possible. I could not but admire him.

"Your objections are recorded, with my own," I said gently. "Remember, by opposing the Wind Lord we side with the Hummingbird and the Smoking Mirror. Now, go and chase Cane-Borer back into line. He is straying again."

I paused to look out over the column with its precious and deadly burdens and hoped we were on the right side. I have seen too much of the laboratory to take the gods so seriously, but you never know.

We progressed slowly after entering Mexica. They are deeper-stilled in ritual than we, and all the local gods had to be propitiated, especially on a mission of such deep and serious religious significance. Not that the locals (presumably) knew what was up. Only the two of us, Obsidian, and our Mexican envoys carried knowledge of the reason for our trip.

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Our auxiliaries and the locals prepared each sacrifice and observance in accordance with the requirements of a visiting embassy: a dance here, a goat-sacrifice there, a delegation of corn maidens bearing rich mantles at the next village, the giving of jade, the breaking of jade. The farmers, soldiers, and townsmen turned out to stare at us, no doubt assuming us to be visiting gods. I tired of it very quickly. By the time we reached the pass overlooking the City of Lakes we were thick enough with salted blood to take on a god, and we snapped continually at each other.

"There," Obsidian said simply, pointing down to a swiftly moving plume of dust on the valley floor. I had never seen the like.

"What is it? A dust-spirit?"

"No. It is true. The invaders ride like the wind upon hornless deer that fight for them. They have great and small sticks that speak and ones that shoot tiny arrows. All of them kill."

"Formidable. How many of these monsters are there?" Obsidian gave me a sour look.

"Perhaps five hundred."

"And how many Mexicans are there?"

Obsidian scowled, then lapsed to a sigh. He seemed to have aged greatly these past weeks, or were we just two disheartened old men on fools' business? "Scientist, when I coax the maize shoots from the earth, you may tell an old soldier how to fight wars. I have spoken to scores of warriors since we have entered Mexica, knights and private soldiers alike. I will not recount tedious and redundant conversations; how their deer spread terror, how their weapons slice through ours as ours slice flesh, how this Cortes cannot be killed and always trimphs, rallying his men to prodigious feats of arms."

"So he must die."

Obsidian nodded. "If he does not, he will rule Mexica. Then he will come to rule *us*."

My heart sank. He was right.

I am not comfortable around our own courtiers and sycophants, nobles and lords. The Mexicans, torn in a fearful frenzy between the resurrected Lord of the Winds and the displeasure of the Smoking Mirror and the Hummingbird, between the vacilating Moctecucuma and his firebrand nobles, made my bile burn. Here the military caste was even stronger than ours and the army, stung by defeats and a scarcity of captives for sacrifice, was crying to avenge itself. The First Speaker had forbidden direct action, but his nephew, the Lord of Small Maize Cobs, was of no such humor. On the second evening he received the War-Marshal and myself. I had put Small Dogs to organizing our quarters and making secure our cargo, afraid to let his short temper loose among such dan-

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gerous ears. Obsidian and I bowed in the Lord's presence. Without a word he bade us to follow him out onto the balcony.

The City is built upon islands in the midst of the Great Lake of Flowers, causeways of many bridges connecting it to the lake shore. Here and there vast temples lift to the sky. In the sunset it is very beautiful. Lord Maize Cobs indicated an impressive palace across the water, connected to the causeway network by spidery bridges.

"The Palace of Lord Face of the Water. *He* is there."

"Cortes?" Obsidian asked. We had been warned not to refer to him by his god-name among the conspirators.

"Yes. And the Courageous Lord also."

"Moctecucuma is there?"

"Yes. Cortes holds him captive. A willing captive. He has subverted his purpose. It is a tragedy."

"But," I said carefully, "if we use the Wind Dust on the invaders, it will surely kill the First Speaker also."

"I know. It is a problem." Maize Cobs shook his head. "Somehow, we must break the impasse."

We settled in. Small Dogs took charge, setting up work schedules, posting guards and messengers. To keep him from chafing, I began teaching Obsidian the rudiments of Wind Spore science. He was a surprisingly adept pupil, but, when he had learned enough to fully appreciate the nature of the weapons we had brought, he went through a surprising crisis of conscience. We were walking on the Sunrise Causeway, in the company of Lord Maize Cobs' escorts, when he drew me aside upon the landing of a bridge. Bidding the escorts to move on apace, he turned toward the waters of the great lake. Mercantile canoes were moving among the buildings, carrying smaller trade goods and delivering provisions.

"Peaceful, isn't it?" Obsidian grunted. I fidgeted nervously. On the pecking pole of our nation he was still well my superior, though I was in charge of the substance of our embassy. "Relax, Scientist. No ceremony. I am . . . deeply troubled."

"You?"

He glanced at the guards but they were well out of hearing.

"Tell me again, Scientist."

I looked at his tight, bitter face. I knew what he meant.

"When the wind spores were discovered during the end of the last cycle, the priests ruled that it was due to a propitious gift of the gods," I said. "As heavenly gifts, we would be foolish not to use them. Perhaps blasphemous."

"Blasphemous . . ."

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"That is the official word on the subject," I continued, "handed down from the Chief Priest of the Cycle and reaffirmed to this day. Holy writ."

"And, of course, *you* believe this," Obsidian grunted.

"Marshal, I am a scientist. The spore seeds come from the invisible gasses of decay. We culture them in the laboratory, culling out the weak ones, breeding for speed and virulence, until we possess the deadliest diseases known to man: Red Lungs, Shaking Horror, Smiter of Manhood, Child Strangler. If these are gifts from the gods, they certainly mean to destroy us. No, Marshal, I do not believe this holy writ. This is a discovery of science. It is enough to make the bloodiest god sick at heart."

Obsidian nodded silently, then spoke. "Yes. There was a time when I would have seized eagerly upon a discovery such as this. As a weapon it is . . ." He shook his head. "I have no words."

"Unparalleled? Awesome? Terrible?"

"*Wrong*. It is wrong. What are we unleashing? What will come of us if we use it?"

"What will come of us here? Or from the gods? In the afterlife, spiritually?"

"Both," he said miserably. "All. Where will this lead?"

We stood for a while. There had been a time when I would have been afraid of such a question from one such as Obsidian. Now I was merely nonplussed. There were no answers. It was all as-you-go-and-explain-later.

"It leads where it leads. I do not agree with this, but I have been given my orders. By *you*. Did not someone give you your orders?"

"You know they did."

"There's your answer."

Obsidian spat into the water. "That answer stinks, Scientist."

"I know."

"Is it fully a matter of keeping safe the presence of the First Speaker, or are there other considerations as well?"

The question was positively labyrinthine, considering that it was coming from Small Dogs. He had been increasingly basic of late, monosyllabic and nonresponsive. I put down the charging cruet and, I fear, regarded him crossly. One more problem.

"Why do you ask?"

Small Dogs looked positively stoic.

"Come on, out with it. What's bothering you?"

"Nothing's bothering me, why do you ask?"

"I ask because that's the most you've said in twelve days. Look, I know that you disagree with what we're doing. I disagree. And, if truth be told, Obsidian disagrees. But we are under orders."

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"That's no consolation."

I sat down hard, exhaling a rattle of frustration. "I *know* that. But it is a trailstone, a directional post to steer us between various points of displeasure, each of which could easily culminate in being stretched backwards over a stone and having our hearts dug out for displeasing the Hummingbird or the Smoking Mirror."

"Or some other god," the Squire said morosely.

"No. In this circumstance, we are so important as to circumvent the little ones. Only the war god or his king are of danger to us now."

"And what does the Smoking Mirror reveal?"

"Nothing," I replied. "Come with me." We passed through the isolating maze of screens and fans we had set up, coming out on the balcony overlooking the lake front.

"Look there. The Palace of Lord Face of the Water. Cortes is there. Moctecucuma is there. As long as that situation remains, we will not be able to proceed."

Small Dogs leaned on the parapet, clenching and unclenching his fists. He was clearly in heart pain—the deepest and most dangerous kind. And there was nothing I could say to ease him. We stood there for what must have been an hour, watching the sun drop below the western rim. Finally, as the slaves went about lighting the torches, I turned to him.

"The day is over. Sleep. We'll take a day off tomorrow. There is nothing to be done anyway."

"Sir, Lord Dry Rivers Falling!"

Cane-Borer stood panting in the doorway.

"What is it, youngling?"

"Sir, the Lord of Small Maize Cobs wishes to see you, both of you, immediately. The War-Marshal is waiting. Sir, the Smoking Mirror has spoken."

"We have met in council," the Lord of Small Maize Cobs began, "to interpret the speech of the Smoking Mirror." Omens, I thought, looking at the assembled host. Courtiers, retainers, chiefs, senior bureaucrats. A palace revolt. There was no telling how long it had been brewing, and now some cryptic sign had set it off. They would act, through us. Cortes must die. I picked up my burden.

"And, the interpretation?"

"The Smoking Mirror has declared my uncle to be a traitor to our race. We shall attack immediately."

"And if the attack is not successful?"

"Then your expertise will be required."

The attack was not successful. Four assaults were rolled back. Cortes

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kept Moctecucuma prisoner, along with his wives, retainers, and family, one of them Lord Maize Cobs' own wife. It was decided to ask Cortes to send forth the noncombatants—an unprecedented move, but the Wind Spores were not soldiers. They would not distinguish between friend and enemy.

The request was given.

The request was refused.

Lord Maize Cobs mourned, then showed up at our quarters in the ceremonial mantle denoting deepest duty. Without a word, he gave us the order.

The approach had been cleared. Lord Maize Cobs and War-Marshal Obsidian went first, followed at three lengths by myself. After me came Small Dogs and the column, the sealed ewers carried in padded palanquins by slaves of our train. Finally Cane-Borer brought up the rear, holding the staff of our office. The effect was heightened by a touch that Small Dogs had insisted upon. With the exception of the Lord and the Marshal—who had refused—each man wore a cotton filter mask.

When we reached the causeway leading to the stronghold of Cortes we halted, and Lord Maize Cobs gave forth with an impassioned speech, begging Moctecucuma and the other Mexicans to come out, as the enemy watched from their defenses.

It was the first time I had seen these people of the East, these Spanards. They were pale, though deeply tanned over by the sun, and uniformly bearded, some in black, some in brown. A few were even yellow, and I experienced a scientist's regret that I had not the opportunity to talk to these strange men. What we might have learned!

"It's up to you," Obsidian said, breaking my meditation. I looked to see the Lord of Small Maize Cobs retiring toward our defenses, his words unheeded. I turned to Small Dogs, who was watching me unhappily.

"Must I do this?"

"You must. I have not the strength." I deeply regretted that which I next had to say. "I have taken the burden. This is your share."

I expected bitter words from Small Dogs but he simply slumped, his spirit broken, and shrugged out of his cotton jacket. He moved to the palanquin of red and picked up a sealed ceramic sphere, lifting it for the weight. The Span-ards on the walls watched him with interest.

"In the name of Science," he said flatly, and lofted the sphere high into the air. It disappeared over the wall of the Palace of Lord Face of the Water.

Twice he repeated this performance, then we gathered up the equipment and returned to our quarters.

A week later it was over. We were headed home.

* * *

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I set the book down and walked to the window. The sun was dying over the streets of Camazotz, of Old Havana. In the distance smoke was rising above the Temple of Huhueteotl the Fire God, the beacon of ash used to summon the sun's return, to keep time in motion, to secure all things in their place. As we, the Europeans, had been kept in our place, thrown out from the Western hemisphere. As each expedition, each invasion had disappeared without survivors, shrouded in mystery as to what had happened, we were forced to squabble among ourselves in war after war, while the Mexicae watched and grew. As England had fallen to the Spanish Armada, and Spain to the Turks, and Turkey to the Germans, and Germany to the Russians. And now, fragmented and strung together with threats and treaties, we had the effrontery to think that we had opened diplomatic relations with them.

I looked out, to where a graceful white NETO cruiser lay against the Customs Pier, and beyond, to the line of great ugly black and red Mexican battleships rounding the point. Somewhere in the embassy a telephone began to ring, and then another. And another. I put down the fateful little book.

And I knew that the sun that would rise tomorrow over Europe would be red. ●

THE COW WHO JUMPED

She jumped and below her
the careful pleats of the farm,
the ribbons of fences,
the mountains hemming the sea
fell away.

She jumped and the blue globe
was a button beneath her.

She jumped and the stars
like so many rhinestones
were flung against
the velvet cloth of sky.

Her leap was a pattern
for the rest of us.

We sew ourselves into space.

—Jane Yolen

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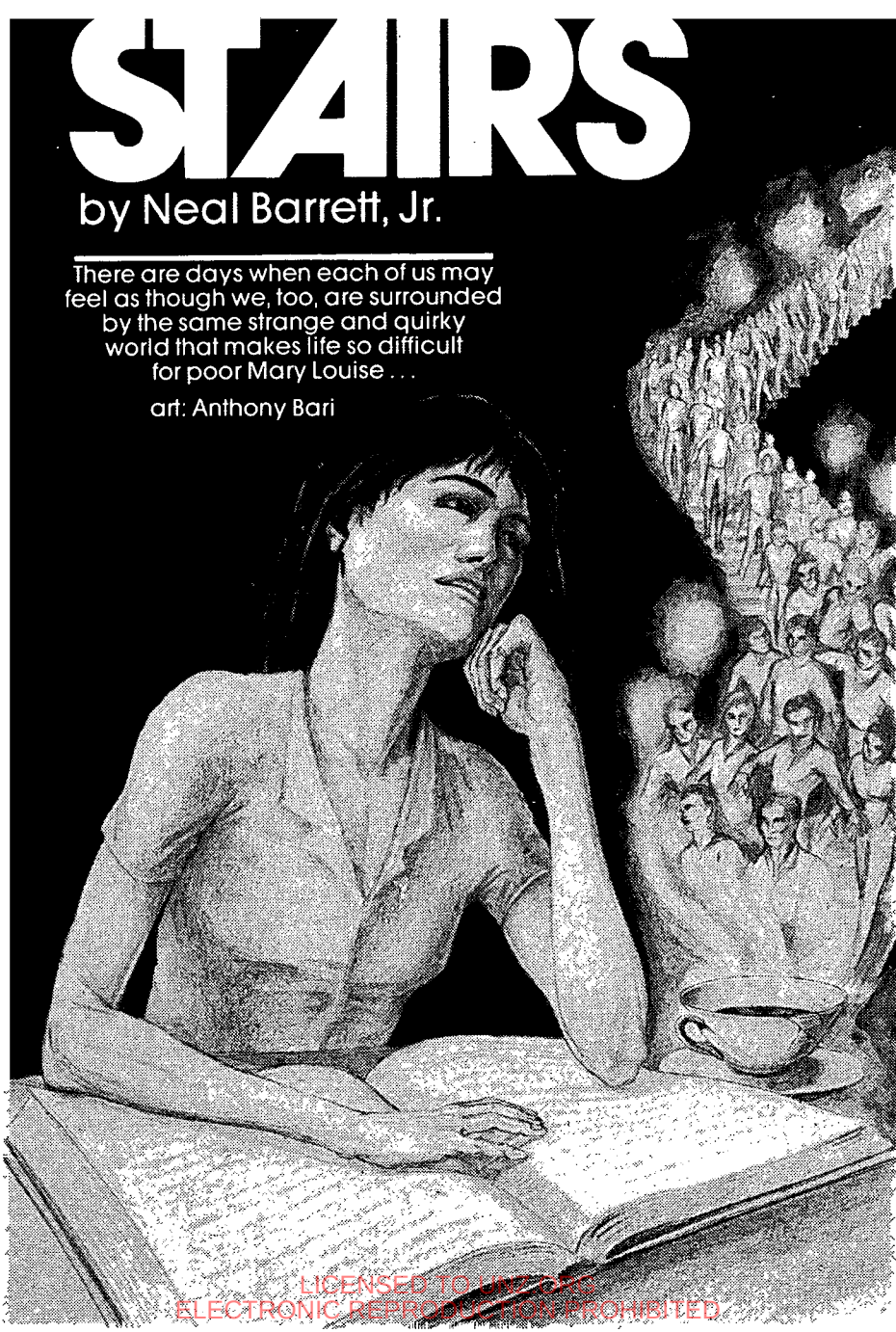
STAIRS

by Neal Barrett, Jr.

There are days when each of us may feel as though we, too, are surrounded by the same strange and quirky world that makes life so difficult for poor Mary Louise . . .

art: Anthony Bari



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Mary Louise made wheat-crackle mush and the last of the cabbage rose tea. "I think what I will do is I will book," she decided. "I will book about the boy with amethyst eyes." The thought made her blush. A naughty flew in her ear and buzzed about. She hurried through supper quick as a wink. Rinsed out the bowl and the long copper spoon and the milk-blue cracked china cup. Moved about the room and fussed and straightened this and that. Made everything neat as it could be.

"That's that," she said at last, and sat down in the straight-back chair and took the big brown book from the table. The binding was chip-brittle, dry and cracked. Mary Louise turned pages limp as soup. A word came off on her finger. She held it up and looked. The word said ƎLIIMƧ. Mary Louise made a face and licked it off. Words became pictures in her head. She saw the young man with amethyst eyes. The crisp black hair and cheery grin. She saw the olive coat and the soot-black trousers and the fine high boots brown as wood. She saw how the clothes fit tight across his chest and muscled arms. Her heart beat faster and a warm touched her lightly on the cheek. She turned the page as quickly as she could. Words slipped off and disappeared. *Thigh* and *quicksilver*, and *mute anticipation.*

Mary Louise booked. The lamp with the red paper shade made a cozy circle of light. The light stayed where it belonged. Never reached dusty corners, wallpaper waterstained and marbled with coffee clouds and the ghosts of tiny flowers. Left undisturbed places sad and torn and worn, a lace dress buried in the wall.

Tap-tap-tap, came a sound or maybe didn't come at all.

Tap-tap-tap, it maybe didn't come again.

Mary Louise stopped booking and watched the dark around the room. The colors time-soft like ash and russet and plum. Colors that smelled of dustballs, whits and spiderbreath, places dry and hollow. She listened to the drone and the rumble on the stairs, listened to the hum of the people passing by.

"Who's there," Mary Louise said softly. "Is that you I hear, Mrs. Wood?"

"Hello, Mary Louise," said Mrs. Wood. "And how are we doing this lovely day?" Voice dry as paper, chipped as a china cup.

"Why I'm just fine, Mrs. Wood."

"And how old are we today, Mary Louise?"

"Nineteen," said Mary Louise, knowing that Mrs. Wood could never remember. "You're feeling well I hope?"

"As well as I can be," said Mrs. Wood.

"Are you sewing, Mrs. Wood?"

"No I'm not, Mary Louise."

"Are you sweeping, Mrs. Wood?"

"No I'm not, Mary Louise."

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"What are you doing, Mrs. Wood?"

"I'm doing a book, Mary Louise."

"Why so am I!" said Mary Louise.

"My book's a book about mice," said Mrs. Wood. "Every possible kind of mice that you can name. Feelmice, realmice, mice that live in a jar."

"I don't suppose I know about a myce," said Mary Louise.

"I can guess what your book's about," said Mrs. Wood. "I can guess it's a book about a boy."

"It is not," said Mary Louise, feeling another warm behind her ears. "It's nothing of the sort!"

"I know young ladies like you," said Mrs. Wood. "I know what they like to do."

"I had a cup of tea," Mary Louise said quickly. "I fixed a fine cup of tea a while ago."

"That's nice," said Mrs. Wood. "Do you know what I'm doing right now? I'm looking at the water. I've been looking at the water all day."

"I see," said Mary Louise, who didn't see at all. She tried to picture Mrs. Wood. Mrs. Wood sat in a chair. Mrs. Wood booked myce and looked at water. Now why would she want to do that?

"How old are you now, Mary Louise?"

"Still nineteen, Mrs. Wood."

"Do you like to dress up, Mary Louise?"

"I only have two dresses, Mrs. Wood."

"Are you pretty, Mary Louise?"

"I wouldn't know, Mrs. Wood."

"Do you play with your little whoozie, Mary Louise?"

"Mrs. *Wood!*" Mary Louise was so startled, the book fell from her lap and struck the floor. "If that's the way you're going to be," she said crossly, "I'm not going to talk to you at all!"

But Mrs. Wood was gone. There was nothing there at all but the rumble of the people on the stairs.

Mary Louise didn't like to go out but there was nothing in the pantry but a biscuit hard as stone. She found a few monies in the drawer. Her big brass key and a broken comb. Monies in her pocket, she unlocked the door and slid the wooden bolt aside. The stairs were people thick. People and the smells that people do. A woman with a nose like a knife tried to peek into her room. She said, *"paste lethal, globally remiss."*

Mary Louise shut the door and locked it tight, thrust the brass key in her pocket. People bumped and pushed and squeezed. Jabbed and poked. Stuck her in the ribs and kicked her shins. She was caught in the crowd and swept along. She passed her orange number on the wall. 320,193. The rumbles and the hums picked her up and sucked her in. Mary Louise

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struggled and shoved, dug and grabbed. Turned and found the lane going down. The stairs twisted pinch-tight and narrow, twisted dizzily round and round. She breathed in feet smells armpit and teeth smells, cheese smells sweat smells, he smells and she smells. Squeezed down the stairs in a flatulescent fog. The walls and the ceilings and the stairs were dark wood caked and clotted with people stuff and the people wrote and scribbled as they passed. Made fingernail names, drew acts they'd like to commit. Mary Louise never read what people wrote.

A woman with a face gray as lead touched her hair. A man found her ear, whispered, *"carp bridal, imminent intent."* Wormed clever fingers down her neck and pinched her pointy. Mary Louise bit her lip and clutched her key. That was a trick they liked to use. Do something awful, make you let go of your key for just a wink. Steal it and get your things while you were gone. Wait and pull you in when you returned.

A yellow bulb made bleary light on every floor. The bulbs were thick with people-soot and spiders. The spiders came to eat and warm their eyes. Mumble-mumble shove. People wearing dun and slate and gray. People wearing patch-torn black and burnt sienna.

320,193

320,189

320,185

One floor one door one more.

Mary Louise shoved and pushed. Popped out of people like a cork. A beggar with putty eyes sat on the floor. A man with a yellow tongue stepped on his hand. The beggar said, *"miscarry, continental mire."*

Grocer Bill ran a store in his room. Mary Louise held her breath and made her way along the wall. There were thirty-seven people inside. The table was lined with brown paper sacks. Grease sacks used sacks, patched with other sacks. There was a curtain on a string.

"Well I haven't seen you for a while, Mary Louise," said Grocer Bill. He wore a green paper hat shaped like a box. Grocer Bill always gave her funny looks, gave her sly funny looks when he knew Mrs. Bill wasn't around. Mary Louise clutched her key and squeezed her money in her pocket.

"I need a few things," said Mary Louise, "what do you have that's good today?"

"I have some very fine lardstring noodles," winked Grocer Bill. "Very fine indeed."

Mary Louise made a face. Sniffed into brown paper sacks. Fat noodles, skinny noodles, noodles white as the skin between her toes.

"I guess I'll take wheat-crackle if you have it," said Mary Louise. "And fatcake and sourmeal pie. There's no dirtsugar I don't suppose?"

"Oh all out of that, I'm afraid."

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"Any cabbage rose tea?" she said, really afraid to ask.

"Now that's hard to get, Mary Louise," said Grocer Bill. "Real hard to get is what it is." His shiny black eyes darted about, searching for Mrs. Bill. One hand snaked under the counter and came up with a small twist of paper. Pressed it in her palm and squeezed her fingers under his. "That's just for you," said Grocer Bill. "Don't tell anyone where you got it."

"Thank you," Mary Louise said politely, "I surely won't."

"Anything else you need today?"

"I don't guess," said Mary Louise.

"That'll be, let's see." Grocer Bill flicked his tongue about his teeth. "About seven monies, Mary Louise."

"Goodness, that much?"

"Hard times, Mary Louise."

Mary Louise dug monies from her pocket. There were six pearl buttons and a black steel washer. A thumbtack without any point, and a marble as blind as an eye. A military button with important swirly lines.

"Let's see what we have," said Grocer Bill. Poked at her palm, sneaked a tickle. Snatched up the button and went right for the cloudy eye. Mary Louise snapped her fist shut tight.

"That's a real good monies that first one," she said firmly. "That *ought* to be enough. It's probably a nine is what it is."

"Well now I wouldn't say a nine," grinned Grocer Bill, the grin telling her he'd gotten the best of the bargain. She wished she hadn't shown him the button at all.

Grocer Bill put her goods in a sack. Mrs. Bill poked her head through the curtain, saw Mary Louise and made a face. Mary Louise smiled. Turned to go. Stopped, and looked curiously down the table. A boy was leaning against the wall. Not buying a thing, just leaning against the wall. He was tall and knobby-kneed with a thatch of yellow hair. The hair seemed to perch upon his head, as if it didn't intend to stay. He carried a wooden box on a string. The string hung over his shoulder to his side. And his clothes— He had a *most* peculiar clothes. Mary Louise had never seen such a clothes in all her life. It was a patchwork of bright and raggedy squares. Reds and blues and greens. Yellows and silvers and golds. Colors she couldn't name and didn't want to if she could. How awful, she thought. How terribly ugly and bright. What a frightening thing to wear!

The boy looked up. Looked right at her as if he'd guessed what she was thinking all along. There were tiny blue lights in his eyes. The lights sparked and danced. He smiled at Mary Louise. The smile seemed to slice his face in two. Mary Louise felt a warm in her tummy. A fidget behind her knees. She grabbed her sack and ducked into the crowd.

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The first floors were slow, slower than ever. At three-two-oh, one-eight-eight, everything came to a stop. Nothing moved ahead. Crowds backed up behind. People mumbled and shoved. Officer Bob came bounding up the stairs, banging his stick against the wall.

"Flatten up, everyone, flatten up," he called out. "Train coming through right now!"

"Oh no," groaned Mary Louise, and everyone else groaned too.

Before long the train came plodding up from below. Both lanes crowded against the wall, but there was still scarcely room for the train to pass. First came a skinny little man in coal-black, gray paper stripes across his chest. He beat on a can with a wooden stick.

Clack, clack—clack-clack-clack!

Then came the train, each man moving at a slow and steady pace.

"Huh, huh—huh-huh-huh!

"Huh, huh—huh-huh-huh!"

Big heavy boxes were strapped to their backs. Their backs were broad and strong. They were built just like the boxes, chests and shoulders square and hard. Legs thick as poles, ankles the same as thighs. Mary Louise could smell the sharp and tingly sweat, the heat as hot as a stove.

"Huh, huh—huh-huh-huh!

"Huh, huh—huh-huh-huh!"

A little girl began to count. "Seventy-nine . . . seventy-ten . . . seventy-leven . . ."

"Hush," said the little girl's mother.

Numbers were scribbled on the boxes. Numbers as thick as the scribbles on the walls. Numbers over numbers and over numbers still. Mary Louise read them as the train rumbled past her up the stairs.

377,920
351,444
344,119

"Goodness!" Mary Louise said aloud, doing quick sums in her head. Doing numbers minus her floor from the boxes passing by. What a long way to go—what a terribly *long* way to go. Of course they got to rest, she decided. Surely they got to rest. She'd never seen a train stopped, only trains going up and going down.

One of the trains raised his head and looked right at Mary Louise. His eyes were noodle-white, his mouth a crooked nail. He said, *"indigo confection, common oversight."*

"Hello," said Mary Louise to be nice.

Officer Bob gave the signal. The crowd raised a cheer and surged ahead. Traffic began to move in both lanes.

"Why hello, Mary Louise," said Officer Bob. "How have you been I'd like to know."

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"Why I've been fine," said Mary Louise, feeling a warm on the tip of her chin. Officer Bob was tall and strong, nearly the size of some of the train. He wore a blue paper hat and kindly eyes.

"It's awfully crowded today," said Mary Louise. "I thought I'd never get to the store."

Officer Bob shook his head. Leaned in close to Mary Louise. "Stair wars," he said, so low that only Mary Louise could hear. "Real bad trouble down below."

"Oh my!" said Mary Louise.

"Now that's all down in the two-eighties, not here," Officer Bob added quickly. "But a thing like that'll back up a long ways. You have a care now, Mary Louise." He tipped his blue hat and Mary Louise climbed the rest of the way home.

Back in the safety of her own 320,193 Mary Louise locked the door and slipped the big wooden bar in its place. Tossed off her dress and didn't bother to put it away. Set the kettle on the stove and washed and scrubbed beneath the faucet till the smell of the stairs was nearly gone. Slipped on her other dress and poured a fresh cup of cabbage rose tea.

"I *guess* I'll have to drink a cup in the morning and one at night," she sighed aloud. "If I want to make it last any at all." And after that what would she do? She was nearly out of monies and couldn't think where to find any more.

"Oh well," she said, catching the last spicy drop on the tip of her tongue, "there's no use worrying about *that*." Turning back the covers she slipped quickly into bed and in a moment she was fast asleep on her pillow.

She dreamed of drinking tea with Mrs. Wood. Mary Louise booked myce and Mrs. Wood looked at water. The water wasn't clear like water ought to be it was the color of amethyst eyes. Mary Louise enjoyed the dream until she saw the boy's terrible clothes. Raggedy-patch clothes in awful colors that hurt her eyes. "That's *not* who you're supposed to be," said Mary Louise. The boy grinned. Lardstring noodles fell out of his mouth.

Mary Louise ate and slept and drank cabbage rose tea. She wouldn't talk to Mrs. Wood. She wouldn't sit by the table and the lamp. She took her chair to the wall between the pantry and the bed. Sometimes if she closed her eyes and listened she could hear the singers there. They sang like bells if bells could sing. Close and far away. She could never hear the words, but she could tell when the singers were happy or sad. Sometimes she wondered where they were. Sometimes she wondered if they were anywhere at all. They were certainly much nicer than Mrs. Wood.

Someone knocked at the door. Mary Louise gave a start. She opened

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the little hole but didn't peek right away. That's what they liked to do. Wait until you looked then squirt something awful inside. Or poke out your eye with a stick. This time it was only Postman Jack and Mary Louise slid the big bolt aside and opened the door.

"Hello, Mary Louise," smiled Postman Jack, "and how are you? Like to buy a mail today?"

"Oh, I would," said Mary Louise, "but I don't have monies to spend now."

"Real sorry to hear that," said Postman Jack. He wore a brown paper hat. Gold paper buttons pinned to his coat. A shabby gray bag drooped from his shoulder to his knees. "I've got one here I can let you have cheap," he told Mary Louise. "Hardly any monies at all."

"I'm afraid that's still too much for me," sighed Mary Louise.

"This is a very special mail," said Postman Jack. "Very special mail indeed."

"Special how?" said Mary Louise.

"You'll see," said Postman Jack, "you'll see." And with that he dipped a hand into his bag and drew a mail out with a flourish. "There now," he said, with a sparkle in his eye, "what do you think of that?"

Mary Louise wanted to be polite, but she really didn't think much at all. The mail was thin as air, a pale and sallow green. It looked as if it might simply whoof and disappear.

"It doesn't look very special to me," said Mary Louise. "It looks like a mail nobody wants."

"Well now, there's two halves to every mail," winked Postman Jack, "and you haven't seen the other." He flipped the mail over and held it right before her eyes.

"Oh," said Mary Louise, bringing a finger to her lips, "oh my!"

"See," said Postman Jack, "didn't I say it was special? What do you say now, Mary Louise?"

Mary Louise knew she shouldn't, but she really wanted the mail. Before she could change her mind she dug a hand in her pocket and came up with the marble like an eye.

"This is all I can afford," she said sadly, "and I can't really *afford* to spend that."

"I'll take it," said Postman Jack, snapping up the monies quick as air. "I'll take it since it's you."

"Oh thank you," said Mary Louise, pleased and surprised at her good fortune. "Thank you, Postman Jack!"

"My pleasure," said Postman Jack. He tipped his brown hat and he was gone.

Mary Louise swore she'd just put the mail aside, save it for when there

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was nothing else to do. Since that was right now or most any time at all, she ran to the kettle and made tea, cut a piece of fatcake and sat in the chair beneath the lamp. For a long time she looked at the pale green paper, at the paper so sheer she was certain a spider had made it. A spider as old as Mrs. Wood. Whoever had written the mail had drawn a very nice stamp to go along. It wound in sepia lines like a wispy tangle of wire that didn't end and didn't begin. Finally she turned the mail over and looked at the tiny faded script. Caught her breath in wonder once again.

668,110

Goodness, thought Mary Louise, how could you even imagine a place so terribly far away? What was it like? How did it look? What did the people do? Mary Louise couldn't wait another moment. She carefully opened the mail. Dreamed of far adventure, strange customs and rites. The words on the paper were so delicate and tiny she could scarcely make them out, words drawn with a mite-whisker pen. She held her breath afraid she'd blow them away. Brought the mail up close to her eyes. What the mail said was this:

> Tailor John said he would make me a clothes for three monies. He is a liar and he knows it. If my legs hadn't give out bad I would go up there and tell him.

"Is that *all?*" Mary Louise cried. She stomped her feet on the floor. "Well I'm certainly going to tell Postman Jack what I think about that!"

"What are you doing, Mary Louise?" said Mrs. Wood.

"I'm booking a mail, Mrs. Wood," said Mary Louise, then remembered she wasn't speaking to Mrs. Wood.

"My son writes me every week," said Mrs. Wood. "Even when he's out to sea."

"Out to see what?" Mary Louise said crossly.

"You are a sassy, impudent girl," said Mrs. Wood. "I doubt you have education or bearing. I expect you go naked under your clothes."

"Just go *away*, Mrs. Wood," said Mary Louise.

Mary Louise booked about the boy with amethyst eyes. She slept and got up and ate sourmeal pie and drank the last of the cabbage rose tea. She fussed about the room and washed her cup and washed her spoon and listened to the traffic on the stairs. Rumble-rumble hum. Sometimes it came through the door and over the floor and went tingling up her legs. Sometimes it buzzed about in her head. Why couldn't everyone stop going up or going down? Why couldn't everyone stay where they belonged?

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The knock gave her a start. "Who's there," she called out, "what do you want?"

"You're never going to know if you don't look out and see," said the voice. "You'll have to look and see, Mary Louise."

It was a very *nice* voice, thought Mary Louise. But that didn't fool her for a minute. "I can do very well without looking," she said firmly. "Now please go away and leave me alone."

The voice became a laugh. A laugh sharp as glass that cut cleanly through the heavy wooden door and rattled dishes on the shelf.

"My goodness," said Mary Louise. She opened the hole a crack. Saw a patch of yellow hair. Saw a mouth so wide it could make a laugh any size it wanted. Eyes like crackly blue hot electric lights. The eyes made a warm at the hollow of her neck. Mary Louise caught her breath and backed half a step away.

"I know who you are," she said at last. "You're the boy with the funny clothes from Grocer Bill's."

"Right you are," said the boy. "Open up and let me in, Mary Louise."

"I'll do nothing of the sort," said Mary Louise. "I don't even know you at all."

"But I know you," said the boy. "I've brought you a fine present, and my name is Artist Dan."

"What kind of a present?" Mary Louise asked cautiously.

"A present like this," said Artist Dan, and waved a fat paper sack where she could see. "Cabbage rose tea, Mary Louise, and lots of it. The finest you'll ever taste, I promise you that."

"Oh my." The sack grew larger as she looked. Of course it could be full of stones and dead spiders for all she knew, and likely was.

"You can't come in," she said boldly. "I don't know who you are and besides your awful clothes are hurting my eyes. No one wears a clothes like *that*."

"Not here they don't," said Artist Dan. "And there are places I've been where they don't wear pitch and soot and dead-grub yellow. Lead and drab and shadow-black and slug-dung madder. Colors dull as belly button fuzz in the dark of night."

"Well if people dress like you somewhere," said Mary Louise, "I hope it's far away."

"Far is near and near is far," said Artist Dan.

"That's the silliest thing I've ever heard."

"Maybe so, maybe not."

"*I* have a mail from six-six-eight, one-one-oh," said Mary Louise.

"Far is where you aren't," said Artist Dan.

"See, you keep doing it," Mary Louise said sharply. "What do you art, anyway? I'll bet you art on the stairs is what you do."

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"I paint," said Artist Dan.

"Paint what?" said Mary Louise.

"Paint people," said Artist Dan. "People is what I paint. I'll paint you if you like, Mary Louise."

"Well I wouldn't," Mary Louise said shortly. "I wouldn't like it at all."

"I have colors in my box you've never seen," said Artist Dan. "Bottle-green and apricot and cream. Violet and lilac and seven shades of blue. Saffron and vermilion, tangerine and pearl . . ."

"Go away," cried Mary Louise, "go away and leave me alone!" She snapped the hole shut, turned and leaned against the door, and heard her heart beat loudly in her ears. Pressed her head against the wood and imagined she heard him breathe. That's as foolish as it can be, she thought at once. All you can hear are the people on the stairs.

She waited long and listened, didn't breathe. What if he didn't go away? What if he stood there with all his awful colors? With his dreadful vermilions and his blues and bottle-greens? After a while she was certain he wasn't there. What she really needed now was a nice cup of cabbage rose tea. The kettle was nearly hot before she remembered the tea was gone. She tore Grocer Bill's little twisty brown paper in a hundred tiny pieces, dropped them in the drawer with the key and the broken comb. She wanted to cry but couldn't remember what to do. All she wanted was some tea. What was the matter with that? And it *wasn't* tea he'd dangled before the door. It was just another trick is what it was.

Mary Louise slept and ate wheat-crackle mush. Cleaned up her room and sat in her chair and booked the boy with amethyst eyes. Slammed the book shut and saw words fly this way and that. The olive coat was gone and the soot-black trousers and the fine high boots as brown as wood. The colors in her head were amber and gold and ultramarine. Cobalt and cadmium and chrome. The crisp black hair was lemon-yellow and hurt her eyes.

"Mary Louise," said Mrs. Wood, "Mary Louise?"

Mary Louise took her chair across the room. The singers were silent and wouldn't sing. She threw herself on the bed and pulled the covers over her head. She dreamed he painted indigo waves beneath her eyes, brushed silver across her lips. Circled her waist with emerald indecision, dappled crimson on her thighs. Drew a raw and florid rainbow to her toes. When she woke her heart was louder than the hum and the mumble on the stairs. When she stood her legs were weak and there were spiders in her head.

"Are you there, Mrs. Wood?" called Mary Louise. If Mrs. Wood was there she didn't say. The singers were back again but she could scarcely hear their song. She carried her chair to the far end of the room. The

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corners that smelled old, where the light from the lamp would never go. She never ever came here because there was nothing here to do. No one talked or sang or said hello. There was nothing but the dust-smell, wallpaper waterstained, colors faded and gone.

And here, thought Mary Louise, is exactly where I want to be, not anywhere at all. I don't want to smell awful people on the stairs. I don't want to see bad colors or yellow hair or electric eyes. I don't want dreams that leave warms in funny places. I don't even want a cup of tea. What I want is for everyone to simply leave me alone.

"Plover leech regatta," someone said, *"gainfully intact."*

"*Please* go away," said Mary Louise . . . ●

NEXT ISSUE

Hugo-and-Nebula winner **Robert Silverberg** returns to these pages next month with one of the most exciting and provocative novellas he's written in years, our October cover story, "We Are For the Dark." The Lord Magistrate of Senders is a high prelate in the Order, a militant ecclesiastical organization which is regulating humanity's exodus to the stars, overseeing a careful program of immigration and colonization, a program it enforces through its control of the teleportation gateways that are the only way to reach across space to the rich new worlds waiting to be settled. But suddenly there are signs that this careful master plan has begun to go seriously awry. Some wild factor is loose among the stars, doing the impossible, breaking all the rules, changing everything. Something is wrong out there in the Dark, and the Lord Magistrate must go out to seek the trouble at its root, out into the Dark, never to return. But once out there in the midnight gulfs between the stars, he finds much more than he bargained for, terror and wonder that will change his life forever... this is Silverberg at his evocative best, and one of the year's major stories; don't miss it. Nebula-winner **Lucius Shepard** is also on hand for October, and in the eerie novella "Nomans Land," he explores the heart of another sort of darkness, a darkness heavy with ancient evil and timeless mystery that might just contain the world itself—we guarantee that this is one of the scariest and most powerful stories you'll see this year, with shockers in it that will bring you right up out of your seat!

ALSO IN OCTOBER: **Tim Sullivan** returns with the poignant story of a boy who is forced to come to terms with his strange and frightening destiny—and a bizarre one it *is*, too—in "Father to the Man"; new writer **Lisa Mason** makes her *IAsfm* debut with a cracklingly-tense story of murder and magic and madness, in "Guardian"; **Geoffrey A. Landis** returns with the story of a doomed and dogged quest throughout all of time and space, in "Ripples in the Dirac Sea"; and **Don Webb,** whose "Jesse Revenged" has become something of a cult classic in some circles since we published it here a couple of years ago, returns to regale us with the bizarre and funny tale of what happens to those who run afoul of some "Common Superstitions." Plus an array of columns and features. Look for our October issue on sale on your newsstands on August 23, 1988.

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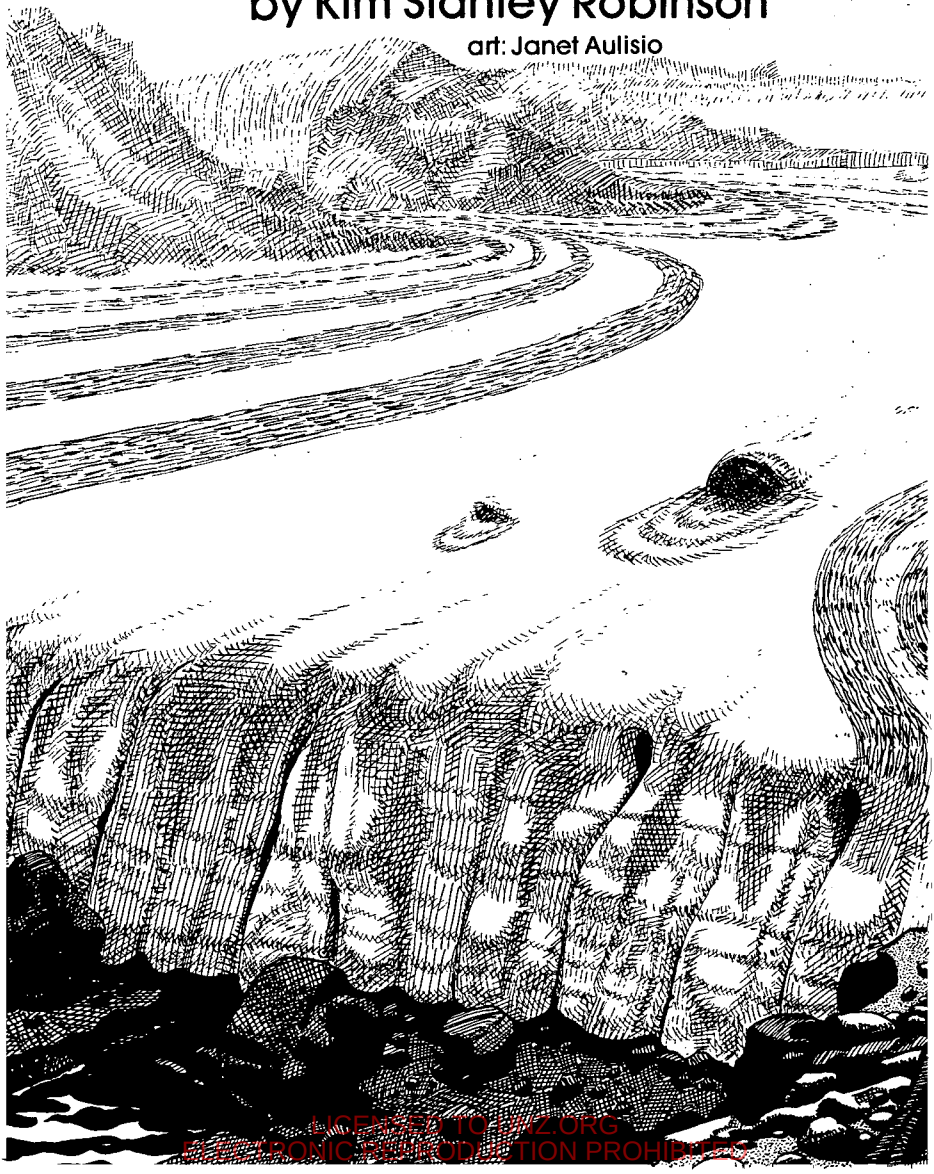
GLACIER

by Kim Stanley Robinson

art: Janet Aulisio



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Kim Stanley Robinson's most recent fiction has garnered a great deal of critical acclaim. His novel *The Gold Coast* (Tor Books), has been well received by readers, and by reviewers for the New York *Times,* the Washington *Post,* and other news outlets. In addition, Mr. Robinson's novella, "The Blind Geometer" (*IAsfm,* August 1987), has just won the 1987 Nebula award.

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"This is Stella," Mrs. Goldberg said. She opened the cardboard box and a gray cat leaped out and streaked under the corner table.

"That's where we'll put her blanket," Alex's mother said.

Alex got down on hands and knees to look. Stella was a skinny old cat; her fur was an odd mix of silver, black, and pinkish tan. Yellow eyes. Part tortoise-shell, Mom had said. The color of the fur over her eyes made it appear her brow was permanently furrowed. Her ears were laid flat.

"Remember she's kind of scared of boys," Mrs. Goldberg said.

"I know." Alex sat back on his heels. Stella hissed. "I was just looking." He knew the cat's whole story. She had been a stray that began visiting the Goldbergs' balcony to eat their dog's food, then—as far as anyone could tell—to hang out with the dog. Remus, a stiff-legged ancient thing, seemed happy to have the company, and after a while the two animals were inseparable. The cat had learned how to behave by watching Remus, and so it would go for a walk, come when you called it, shake hands and so on. Then Remus died, and now the Goldbergs had to move. Mom had offered to take Stella in, and though Father sighed heavily when she told him about it, he hadn't refused.

Mrs. Goldberg sat on the worn carpet beside Alex, and leaned forward so she could see under the table. Her face was puffy. "It's okay, Stell-bell," she said. "It's okay."

The cat stared at Mrs. Goldberg with an expression that said *You've got to be kidding*. Alex grinned to see such skepticism.

Mrs. Goldberg reached under the table; the cat squeaked in protest as it was pulled out, then lay in Mrs. Goldberg's lap quivering like a rabbit. The two women talked about other things. Then Mrs. Goldberg put Stella in Alex's mother's lap. There were scars on its ears and head. It breathed fast. Finally it calmed under Mom's hands. "Maybe we should feed her something," Mom said. She knew how distressed animals could get in this situation: they themselves had left behind their dog Pongo, when they moved from Toronto to Boston. Alex and she had been the ones to take Pongo to the Wallaces; the dog had howled as they left, and walking away Mom had cried. Now she told Alex to get some chicken out of the fridge and put it in a bowl for Stella. He put the bowl on the couch next to the cat, who sniffed at it disdainfully and refused to look at it. Only after much calming would it nibble at the meat, nose drawn high over one sharp eyetooth. Mom talked to Mrs. Goldberg, who watched Stella eat. When the cat was done it hopped off Mom's lap and walked up and down the couch. But it wouldn't let Alex near; it crouched as he approached, and with a desperate look dashed back under the table. "Oh Stella!" Mrs. Goldberg laughed. "It'll take her a while to get used to you," she said to Alex, and sniffed. Alex shrugged.

* * *

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Outside the wind ripped at the treetops sticking above the buildings. Alex walked up Chester Street to Brighton Avenue and turned left, hurrying to counteract the cold. Soon he reached the river and could walk the path on top of the embankment. Down in its trough the river's edges were crusted with ice, but midstream was still free, the silty gray water riffled by white. He passed the construction site for the dam and came to the moraine, a long mound of dirt, rocks, lumber, and junk. He climbed it with big steps, and stood looking at the glacier.

The glacier was immense, like a range of white hills rolling in from the west and north. The Charles poured from the bottom of it and roiled through a cut in the terminal moraine; the glacier's snout loomed so large that the river looked small, like a gutter after a storm. Bright white iceberg chunks had toppled off the face of the snout, leaving fresh blue scars and clogging the river below.

Alex walked the edge of the moraine until he was above the glacier's side. To his left was the razed zone, torn streets and fresh dirt and cellars open to the sky; beyond it Allston and Brighton, still bustling with city life. Under him, the sharp-edged mound of dirt and debris. To his right, the wilderness of ice and rock. Looking straight ahead it was hard to believe that the two halves of the view came from the same world. Neat. He descended the moraine's steep loose inside slope carefully, following a path of his own.

The meeting of glacier and moraine was a curious juncture. In some places the moraine had been undercut and had spilled across the ice in wide fans; you couldn't be sure if the dirt was solid or if it concealed crevasses. In other places melting had created a gap, so that a thick cake of ice stood over empty air, and dripped into gray pools below. Once Alex had seen a car in one of these low wet caves, stripped of its paint and squashed flat.

In still other places, however, the ice sloped down and overlaid the moraine's gravel in a perfect ramp, as if fitted by carpenters. Alex walked the trough between dirt and ice until he reached one of these areas, then took a big step onto the curved white surface. He felt the usual quiver of excitement: he was on the glacier.

It was steep on the rounded side slope, but the ice was embedded with thousands of chunks of gravel. Each pebble, heated by the sun, had sunk into a little pocket of its own, and was then frozen into position in the night; this process had been repeated until most chunks were about three-quarters buried. Thus the glacier had a peculiarly pocked, rocky surface, which gripped the torn soles of Alex's shoes. A non-slip surface. No slope on the glacier was too steep for him. Crunch, crunch, crunch: tiny arabesques of ice collapsed under his feet with every step. He could change the glacier, he was part of its action. Part of it.

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Where the side slope leveled out the first big crevasses appeared. These deep blue fissures were dangerous, and Alex stepped between two of them and up a narrow ramp very carefully. He picked up a fist-sized rock, tossed it in the bigger crack. *Clunk clunk . . . splash.* He shivered and walked on, ritual satisfied. He knew from these throws that at the bottom of the glacier there were pockets of air, pools of water, streams running down to form the Charles . . . a deadly subglacial world. No one who fell into it would ever escape. It made the surface ice glow with a magical danger, an internal light.

Up on the glacier proper he could walk more easily. Crunch crunch crunch, over an undulating broken debris-covered plain. Ice for miles on miles. Looking back toward the city he saw the Hancock and Prudential towers to the right, the lower MIT towers to the left, poking up at low scudding clouds. The wind was strong here and he pulled his jacket hood's drawstring tighter. Muffled hoot of wind, a million tricklings. There were little creeks running in channels cut into the ice: it was almost like an ordinary landscape, streams running in ravines over a broad rocky meadow. And yet everything was different. The streams ran into crevasses or potholes and instantly disappeared, for instance. It was wonderfully strange to look down such a rounded hole: the ice was very blue and you could see the air bubbles in it, air from some year long ago.

Broken seracs exposed fresh ice to the sun. Scores of big erratic boulders dotted the glacier, some the size of houses. He made his way from one to the next, using them as cover. There were gangs of boys from Cambridge who occasionally came up here, and they were dangerous. It was important to see them before he was seen.

A mile or more onto the glacier, ice had flowed around one big boulder, leaving a curving wall some ten feet high—another example of the glacier's whimsy, one of hundreds of strange surface formations. Alex had wedged some stray boards into the gap between rock and ice, making a seat that was tucked out of the west wind. Flat rocks made a fine floor, and in the corner he had even made a little fireplace. Every fire he lit sank the hearth of flat stones a bit deeper into the otherwise impervious ice.

This time he didn't have enough kindling, though, so he sat on his bench, hands deep in pockets, and looked back at the city. He could see for miles. Wind whistled over the boulder. Scattered shafts of sunlight broke against ice. Mostly shadowed, the jumbled expanse was faintly pink. This was because of an algae that lived on nothing but ice and dust. Pink; the blue of the seracs; gray ice; patches of white, marking snow or sunlight. In the distance dark clouds scraped the top of the blue Hancock building, making it look like a distant serac. Alex leaned back against his plank wall, whistling one of the songs of the Pirate King.

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Everyone agreed the cat was crazy. Her veneer of civilization was thin, and at any loud noise—the phone's ring, the door slamming—she would jump as if shot, then stop in mid-flight as she recalled that this particular noise entailed no danger; then lick down her fur, pretending she had never jumped in the first place. A flayed sensibility.

She was also very wary about proximity to people; this despite the fact that she had learned to love being petted. So she would often get in moods where she would approach one of them and give an exploratory, half-purring mew; then, if you responded to the invitation and crouched to pet her, she would sidle just out of arm's reach, repeating the invitation but retreating with each shift you made, until she either let you get within petting distance—just—or decided it wasn't worth the risk, and scampered away. Father laughed at this intense ambivalence. "Stella, you're too stupid to live, aren't you," he said in a teasing voice.

"Charles," Mom said.

"It's the best example of approach avoidance behavior I've ever seen," Father said. Intrigued by the challenge, he would sit on the floor, back against the couch and legs stretched ahead of him, and put Stella on his thighs. She would either endure his stroking until it ended, when she could jump away without impediment—or relax, and purr. She had a rasping loud purr, it reminded Alex of a chainsaw heard across the glacier. "Bug brain," Father would say to her. "Button head."

After a few weeks, as August turned to September and the leaves began to wither and fall, Stella started to lap sit voluntarily—but always in Mom's lap. "She likes the warmth," Mom said.

"It's cold on the floor," Father agreed, and played with the cat's scarred ears. "But why do you always sit on Helen's lap, huhn, Stell? I'm the one who started you on that." Eventually the cat would step onto his lap as well, and stretch out as if it was something she had always done. Father laughed at her.

Stella never rested on Alex's lap voluntarily, but would sometimes stay if he put her there and stroked her slowly for a long time. On the other hand she was just as likely to look back at him, go cross-eyed with horror and leap desperately away, leaving claw marks in his thighs. "She's so weird," he complained to Mom after one of these abrupt departures.

"It's true," Mom said with her low laugh. "But you have to remember that Stella was probably an abused kitty."

"How can you abuse a stray?"

"I'm sure there are ways. And maybe she was abused at home, and ran away."

"Who would do that?"

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"Some people would."

Alex recalled the gangs on the glacier, and knew it was true. He tried to imagine what it would be like to be at their mercy, all the time. After that he thought he understood her permanent frown of deep concentration and distrust, as she sat staring at him. "It's just me, Stell-bells."

Thus when the cat followed him up onto the roof, and seemed to enjoy hanging out there with him, he was pleased. Their apartment was on the top floor, and they could take the pantry stairs and use the roof as a porch. It was a flat expanse of graveled tarpaper, a terrible imitation of the glacier's non-slip surface, but it was nice on dry days to go up there and look around, toss pebbles onto other roofs, see if the glacier was visible, and so on. Once Stella pounced at a piece of string trailing from his pants, and next time he brought up a length of Father's yarn. He was astonished and delighted when Stella responded by attacking the windblown yarn enthusiastically, biting it, clawing it, wrestling it from her back when Alex twirled it around her, and generally behaving in a very kittenish way. Perhaps she had never played as a kitten, Alex thought, so that it was all coming out now that she felt safe. But the play always ended abruptly; she would come to herself in mid-bite or bat, straighten up, and look around with a forbidding expression, as if to say *What is this yarn doing draped over me?*—then lick her fur and pretend the preceding minutes hadn't happened. It made Alex laugh.

Although the glacier had overrun many towns to the west and north, Watertown and Newton most recently, there was surprisingly little evidence of that in the moraines, or in the ice. It was almost all natural: rock and dirt and wood. Perhaps the wood had come from houses, perhaps some of the gravel had once been concrete, but you couldn't tell that now. Just dirt and rock and splinters, with an occasional chunk of plastic or metal thrown in. Apparently the overrun towns had been plowed under on the spot, or moved. Mostly it looked like the glacier had just left the White Mountains.

Father and Gary Jung had once talked about the latest plan from MIT. The enormous dam they were building downstream, between Allston and Cambridge, was to hold the glacier back. They were going to heat the concrete of the inner surface of the dam, and melt the ice as it advanced. It would become a kind of frozen reservoir. The melt water would pour through a set of turbines before becoming the Charles, and the electricity generated by these turbines would help to heat the dam. Very neat.

The ice of the glacier, when you got right down to look at it, was clear for an inch or less, cracked and bubble-filled; then it turned a milky white. You could see the transition. Where the ice had been sheared vertically, however—on the side of a serac, or down in a crevasse—the

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clear part extended in many inches. You could see air bubbles deep inside, as if it were badly made glass. And this ice was distinctly blue. Alex didn't understand why there should be that difference, between the white ice laying flat and the blue ice cut vertically. But there it was.

Up in New Hampshire they had tried slowing the glacier—or at least stopping the abrupt "Alaskan slides"—by setting steel rods vertically in concrete, and laying the concrete in the glacier's path. Later they had hacked out one of these installations, and found the rods bent in perfect ninety degree angles, pressed into the scored concrete.

The ice would flow right over the dam.

One day Alex was walking by Father's study when Father called out. "Alexander! Take a look at this."

Alex entered the dark book-lined room. Its window overlooked the weed-filled space between buildings, and green light slanted onto Father's desk. "Here, stand beside me and look in my coffee cup. You can see the reflection of the Morgelis' window flowers on the coffee."

"Oh yeah! Neat."

"It gave me a shock! I looked down and there were these white and pink flowers in my cup, bobbing against a wall in a breeze, all of it tinted sepia as if it were an old-fashioned photo. It took me a while to see where it was coming from, what was being reflected." He laughed. "Through a looking glass."

Alex's father had light brown eyes, and fair wispy hair brushed back from a receding hairline. Mom called him handsome, and Alex agreed: tall, thin, graceful, delicate, distinguished. His father was a great man. Now he smiled in a way Alex didn't understand, looking into his coffee cup.

Mom had friends at the street market on Memorial Drive, and she had arranged work for Alex there. Three afternoons a week he walked over the Charles to the riverside street and helped the fishmongers gut fish, the vegetable sellers strip and clean the vegetables. He also helped set up stalls and take them down, and he swept and hosed the street afterwards. He was popular because of his energy and his willingness to get his hands wet in raw weather. The sleeves of his down jacket were permanently discolored from the frequent soakings—the dark blue almost a brown—a fact that distressed his mom. But he could handle the cold better than the adults; his hands would get a splotchy bluish white and he would put them to the red cheeks of the women and they would jump and say My *God,* Alex, how can you stand it?

This afternoon was blustery and dark but without rain, and it was enlivened by an attempted theft in the pasta stands, and by the ap-

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pearance of a very mangy, very fast stray dog. This dog pounced on the pile of fishheads and entrails and disappeared with his mouth stuffed, trailing slick white-and-red guts. Everyone who saw it laughed. There weren't many stray dogs left these days, it was a pleasure to see one.

An hour past sunset he was done cleaning up and on his way home, hands in his pockets, stomach full, a five dollar bill clutched in one hand. He showed his pass to the National Guardsman and walked out onto Weeks Bridge. In the middle he stopped and leaned over the railing, into the wind. Below the water churned, milky with glacial silt. The sky still held a lot of light. Low curving bands of black cloud swept in from the northwest, like great ribs of slate. Above these bands the white sky was leached away by dusk. Raw wind whistled over his hood. Light water rushing below, dark clouds rushing above . . . he breathed the wind deep into him, felt himself expand until he filled everything he could see.

That night his parents' friends were gathering at their apartment for their bi-weekly party. Some of them would read stories and poems and essays and broadsides they had written, and then they would argue about them; and after that they would drink and eat whatever they had brought, and argue some more. Alex enjoyed it. But tonight when he got home Mom was rushing between computer and kitchen and muttering curses as she hit command keys or the hot water faucet, and the moment she saw him she said, "Oh Alex I'm glad you're here, could you please run down to the laundry and do just one load for me? The Talbots are staying over tonight and there aren't any clean sheets and I don't have anything to wear tomorrow either—thanks, you're a dear." And he was back out the door with a full laundry bag hung over his shoulder and the box of soap in the other hand, stomping grumpily past a little man in a black coat, reading a newspaper on the stoop of 19 Chester.

Down to Brighton, take a right, downstairs into the brightly lit basement laundromat. He threw laundry and soap and quarters into their places, turned the machine on and sat on top of it. Glumly he watched the other people in there, sitting on the washers and dryers. The vibrations put a lot of them to sleep. Others stared dully at the wall. Back in his apartment the guests would be arriving, taking off their overcoats, slapping arms over chests and talking as fast as they could. David and Sara and John from next door, Ira and Gary and Ilene from across the street, the Talbots, Kathryn Grimm, and Michael Wu from Father's university, Ron from the hospital. They would settle down in the living room, on couches and chairs and floor, and talk and talk. Alex liked Kathryn especially, she could talk twice as fast as anyone else, and she called everyone darling and laughed and chattered so fast that everyone was caught up in the rhythm of it. Or David with his jokes, or Jay Talbot

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and his friendly questions. Or Gary Jung, the way he would sit in his corner like a bear, drinking beer and challenging everything that everyone read. "Why abstraction, why this distortion from the real? How does it help us, how does it speak to us? We should forget the abstract!" Father and Ira called him a vulgar Marxist, but he didn't mind. "You might as well be Plekhanov, Gary!" "Thank you very much!" he would say with a sharp grin, rubbing his unshaven jowls. And someone else would read. Mary Talbot once read a fairy tale about the Thing under the glacier; Alex had *loved* it. Once they even got Michael Wu to bring his violin along, and he hmm'd and hawed and pulled at the skin of his neck and refused and said he wasn't good enough, and then shaking like a leaf he played a melody that stilled them all. And Stella! She hated these parties, she spent them crouched deep in her refuge, ready for any kind of atrocity.

And here he was sitting on a washer in the laundromat.

When the laundry was dry he bundled it into the bag, then hurried around the corner and down Chester Street. Inside the glass door of Number 21 he glanced back out, and noticed that the man who had been reading the paper on the stoop next door was still sitting there. Odd. It was cold to be sitting outdoors.

Upstairs the readings had ended and the group was scattered through the apartment, most of them in the kitchen, as Mom had lit the stovetop burners and turned the gas up high. The blue flames roared airily under their chatter, making the kitchen bright and warm. "Wonderful the way white gas burns so clean." "And then they found the poor thing's head and intestines in the alley—it had been butchered right on the spot."

"Alex, you're back! Thanks for doing that. Here, get something to eat."

Everyone greeted him and went back to their conversations. "Gary you are so *conservative,"* Kathryn cried, hands held out over the stove. "It's not conservative at all," Gary replied. "It's a radical goal and I guess it's so radical that I have to keep reminding you it exists. Art should be used to *change* things."

"Isn't that a distortion from the real?"

Alex wandered down the narrow hall to his parents' room, which overlooked Chester Street. Father was there, saying to Ilene, "It's one of the only streets left with trees. It really seems residential, and here we are three blocks from Comm Ave. Hi, Alex."

"Hi, Alex. It's like a little bit of Brookline made it over to Allston."

"Exactly."

Alex stood in the bay window and looked down, licking the last of the carrot cake off his fingers. The man was still down there.

"Let's close off these rooms and save the heat. Alex, you coming?"

He sat on the floor in the living room. Father and Gary and David

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were starting a game of hearts, and they invited him to be the fourth. He nodded happily. Looking under the corner table he saw yellow eyes, blinking back at him; Stella, a frown of the deepest disapproval on her flat face. Alex laughed. "I knew you'd be there! It's okay, Stella. It's okay."

They left in a group, as usual, stamping their boots and diving deep into coats and scarves and gloves and exclaiming at the cold of the stairwell. Gary gave Mom a brief hug. "Only warm spot left in Boston," he said, and opened the glass door. The rest followed him out, and Alex joined them. The man in the black coat was just turning right onto Brighton Avenue, toward the university and downtown.

Sometimes clouds took on just the mottled gray of the glacier, low dark points stippling a lighter gray surface as cold showers draped down. At these times he felt he stood between two planes of some larger structure, two halves: icy tongue, icy roof of mouth. . . .

He stood under such a sky, throwing stones. His target was an erratic some forty yards away. He hit the boulder with most of his throws. A rock that big was an easy target. A bottle was better. He had brought one with him, and he set it up behind the erratic, on a waist-high rock. He walked back to a point where the bottle was hidden by the erratic. Using flat rocks he sent spinners out in a trajectory that brought them curving in from the side, so that it was possible to hit the concealed target. This was very important for the rock fights that he occasionally got involved in; usually he was outnumbered, and to hold his own he relied on his curves and his accuracy in general, and on a large number of ammunition caches hidden here and there. In one area crowded with boulders and crevasses he could sometimes create the impression of two throwers.

Absorbed in the exercise of bringing curves around the right side of the boulder—the hard side for him—he relaxed his vigilance, and when he heard a shout he jumped around to look. A rock whizzed by his left ear.

He dropped to the ice and crawled behind a boulder. Ambushed! He ran back into his knot of boulders and dashed a layer of snow away from one of his big caches, then with hands and pockets full looked carefully over a knobby chunk of cement, in the direction the stone had come from.

No movement. He recalled the stone whizzing by, the brief sight of it and the *zip* it made in passing. That had been close! If that had hit him! He shivered to think of it, it made his stomach shrink.

A bit of almost frozen rain pattered down. Not a shadow anywhere. On overcast days like this one it seemed things were lit from below, by

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the white bulk of the glacier. Like plastic over a weak neon light. Brittle huge blob of plastic, shifting and groaning and once in a while cracking like a gunshot, or grumbling like distant thunder. Alive. And Alex was its ally, its representative among men. He shifted from rock to rock, saw movement and froze. Two boys in green down jackets, laughing as they ran off the ice and over the lateral moraine, into what was left of Watertown. Just a potshot, then. Alex cursed them, relaxed.

He went back to throwing at the hidden bottle. Occasionally he recalled the stone flying by his head, and threw a little harder. Elegant curves of flight as the flat rocks bit the air and cut down and in. Finally one rock spun out into space and turned down sharply. Perfect slider. Its disappearance behind the erratic was followed by a tinkling crash. "Yeah!" Alex exclaimed, and ran to look. Icy glass on glassy ice.

Then, as he was leaving the glacier, boys jumped over the moraine shouting "Canadian!" and "There he is!" and "Get him!" This was more a chase than a serious ambush, but there were a lot of them and after emptying hands and pockets Alex was off running. He flew over the crunchy irregular surface, splashing meltwater, jumping narrow crevasses and surface rills. Then a wide crevasse blocked his way, and to start his jump he leaped onto a big flat rock; the rock gave under his foot and lurched down the ice into the crevasse.

Alex turned in and fell, bringing shoe-tips, knees, elbows and hands onto the rough surface. This arrested his fall, though it hurt. The crevasse was just under his feet. He scrambled up, ran panting along the crevasse until it narrowed, leaped over it. Then up the moraine and down into the narrow abandoned streets of west Allston.

Striding home, still breathing hard, he looked at his hands and saw that the last two fingernails on his right hand had been ripped away from the flesh; both were still there, but blood seeped from under them. He hissed and sucked on them, which hurt. The blood tasted like blood.

If he had fallen into the crevasse, following the loose rock down . . . if that stone had hit him in the face . . . he could feel his heart, thumping against his sternum. Alive.

Turning onto Chester Street he saw the man in the black coat, leaning against the florid maple across the street from their building. Watching them still! Though the man didn't appear to notice Alex, he did heft a bag and start walking in the other direction. Quickly Alex picked a rock out of the gutter and threw it at the man as hard as he could, spraying drops of blood onto the sidewalk. The rock flew over the man's head like a bullet, just missing him. The man ducked and scurried around the corner onto Comm Ave.

Father was upset about something. "They did the same thing to Gary

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and Michael and Kathryn, and their classes are even smaller than mine! I don't know what they're going to do. I don't know what *we're* going to do."

"We might be able to attract larger classes next semester," Mom said. She was upset too. Alex stood in the hall, slowly hanging up his jacket.

"But what about now? And what about later?" Father's voice was strained, almost cracking.

"We're making enough for now, that's the important thing. As for later—well, at least we know now rather than five years down the road."

Father was silent at the implications of this. "First Vancouver, then Toronto, now here—"

"Don't worry about all of it at once, Charles."

"How can I help it!" Father strode into his study and closed the door, not noticing Alex around the corner. Alex sucked his fingers. Stella poked her head cautiously out of his bedroom.

"Hi Stell-bell," he said quietly. From the living room came the plastic clatter of Mom's typing. He walked down the long hallway, past the silent study to the living room. She was hitting the keys hard, staring at the screen, mouth tight.

"What happened?" Alex said.

She looked up. "Hi, Alex. Well—your father got bad news from the university."

"Did he not get tenure again?"

"No, no, it's not a question of that."

"But now he doesn't even have the chance?"

She glanced at him sharply, then back at the screen, where her work was blinking. "I suppose that's right. The department has shifted all the new faculty over to extension, so they're hired by the semester, and paid by the class. It means you need a lot of students. . . ."

"Will we move again?"

"I don't know," she said curtly, exasperated with him for bringing it up. She punched the command key. "But we'll really have to save money, now. Everything you make at the market is important."

Alex nodded. He didn't mention the little man in the black coat, feeling obscurely afraid. Mentioning the man would somehow make him significant—Mom and Father would get angry, or frightened—something like that. By not telling them he could protect them from it, handle it on his own, so they could concentrate on other problems. Besides the two matters couldn't be connected, could they? Being watched; losing jobs. Perhaps they could. In which case there was nothing his parents could do about it anyway. Better to save them that anger, that fear.

He would make sure his throws hit the man next time.

* * *

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Storms rolled in and the red and yellow leaves were ripped off the trees. Alex kicked through piles of them stacked on the sidewalks. He never saw the little man. He put up flyers for his father, who became even more distracted and remote. He brought home vegetables from work, tucked under his down jacket, and Mom cooked them without asking if he had bought them. She did the wash in the kitchen sink and dried it on lines in the back space between buildings, standing knee deep in leaves and weeds. Sometimes it took three days for clothes to dry back there; often they froze on the line.

While hanging clothes or taking them down she would let Stella join her. The cat regarded each shifting leaf with dire suspicion, then after a few exploratory leaps and bats would do battle with all of them, rolling about in a frenzy.

One time Mom was carrying a basket of dry laundry up the pantry stairs when a stray dog rounded the corner and made a dash for Stella, who was still outside. Mom ran back down shouting, and the dog fled; but Stella had disappeared. Mom called Alex down from his studies in a distraught voice, and they searched the back of the building and all the adjacent backyards for nearly an hour, but the cat was nowhere to be found. Mom was really upset. It was only after they had quit and returned upstairs that they heard her, miaowing far above them. She had climbed the big oak tree. "Oh *smart,* Stella," Mom cried, a wild note in her voice. They called her name out the kitchen window, and the desperate miaows redoubled.

Up on the roof they could just see her, perched high in the almost bare branches of the big tree. "I'll get her," Alex said. "Cats can't climb down." He started climbing. It was difficult: the branches were close-knit, and they swayed in the wind. And as he got closer the cat climbed higher. "No, Stella, don't do that! Come here!" Stella stared at him, clamped to her branch of the moment, cross-eyed with fear. Below them Mom said over and over, "Stella, it's okay—it's okay, Stella." Stella didn't believe her.

Finally Alex reached her, near the tree's top. Now here was a problem: he needed his hands to climb down, but it seemed likely he would also need them to hold the terrified cat. "Come here, Stella." He put a hand on her flank; she flinched. Her side pulsed with her rapid breathing. She hissed faintly. He had to maneuver up a step, onto a very questionable branch; his face was inches from her. She stared at him without a trace of recognition. He pried her off her branch, lifted her. If she cared to claw him now she could really tear him up. Instead she clung to his shoulder and chest, all her claws dug through his clothes, quivering under his left arm and hand.

Laboriously he descended, using only the one hand. Stella began

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miaowing fiercely, and struggling a bit. Finally he met Mom, who had climbed the tree quite a ways. Stella was getting more upset. "Hand her to me." Alex detached her from his chest paw by paw, balanced, held the cat down with both hands. Again it was a tricky moment; if Stella went berserk they would all be in trouble. But she fell onto Mom's chest and collapsed, a catatonic ball of fur.

Back in the apartment she dashed for her blanket under the table. Mom enticed her out with food, but she was very jumpy and she wouldn't allow Alex anywhere near her; she ran away if he even entered the room. "Back to square one, I see," Mom commented.

"It's not fair! I'm the one that saved her!"

"She'll get over it." Mom laughed, clearly relieved. "Maybe it'll take some time, but she will. Ha! This is clear proof that cats are smart enough to be crazy. Irrational, neurotic—just like a person." They laughed, and Stella glared at them balefully. "Yes you are, aren't you! You'll come around again."

Often when Alex got home in the early evenings his father was striding back and forth in the kitchen talking loudly, angrily, fearfully, while Mom tried to reassure him. "They're doing the same thing to us they did to Rick Stone! But why!" When Alex closed the front door the conversation would stop. Once when he walked tentatively down the quiet hallway to the kitchen he found them standing there, arms around each other, Father's head in Mom's short hair.

Father raised his head, disengaged, went to his study. On his way he said, "Alex, I need your help."

"Sure."

Alex stood in the study and watched without understanding as his father took books from his shelves and put them in the big laundry bag. He threw the first few in like dirty clothes, then sighed and thumped in the rest in a businesslike fashion, not looking at them.

"There's a used book store in Cambridge, on Mass Ave. Antonio's."

"Sure, I know the one." They had been there together a few times.

"I want you to take these over there and sell them to Tony for me," Father said, looking at the empty shelves. "Will you do that for me?"

"Sure." Alex picked up the bag, shocked that it had come to this. Father's books! He couldn't meet his father's eye. "I'll do that right now," he said uncertainly, and hefted the bag over one shoulder. In the hallway Mom approached and put a hand on his shoulder—her silent thanks—then went into the study.

Alex hiked east toward the university, crossed the Charles River on the great iron bridge. The wind howled in the superstructure. On the Cambridge side, after showing his pass, he put the heavy bag on the

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ground and inspected its contents. Ever since the infamous incident of the spilled hot chocolate, Father's books had been off-limits to him; now a good twenty of them were there in the bag to be touched, opened, riffled through. Many in this bunch were in foreign languages, especially Greek and Russian, with their alien alphabets. Could people really read such marks? Well, Father did. It must be possible.

When he had inspected all the books he chose two in English—*The Odyssey* and *The Colossus of Maroussi*—and put those in his down jacket pockets. He could take them to the glacier and read them, then sell them later to Antonio's—perhaps in the next bag of books. There were many more bagfuls in Father's study.

A little snow stuck to the glacier now, filling the pocks and making bright patches on the north side of every boulder, every serac. Some of the narrower crevasses were filled with it—bright white lines on the jumbled gray. When the whole surface was white the crevasses would be invisible, and the glacier too dangerous to walk on. Now the only danger was leaving obvious footprints for trackers. Walking up the rubble lines would solve that. These lines of rubble fascinated Alex. It looked just as if bulldozers had clanked up here and shoved the majority of the stones and junk into straight lines down the big central tongue of the glacier. But in fact they were natural features. Father had attempted to explain on one of the walks they had taken up here. "The ice is moving, and it moves faster in the middle than on the outer edges, just like a stream. So rocks on the surface tend to slide over time, down into lines in the middle."

"Why are there two lines, then?"

Father shrugged, looking into the blue-green depths of a crevasse. "We really shouldn't be up here, you know that?"

Now Alex stopped to inspect a tire caught in the rubble line. Truck tire, tread worn right to the steel belting. It would burn, but with too much smoke. There were several interesting objects in this neat row of rock and sand: plastic jugs, a doll, a lampbase, a telephone.

His shelter was undisturbed. He pulled the two books from his pockets and set them on the bench, propping them with rock bookends.

He circled the boulder, had a look around. The sky today was a low smooth pearl gray sheet, ruffled by a set of delicate waves pasted to it. The indirect light brought out all the colors: the pink of the remarkable snow algae, the blue of the seracs, the various shades of rock, the occasional bright spot of junk, the many white patches of snow. A million dots of color under the pewter sheet of cloud.

Three creaks, a crack, a long shuddering rumble. Sleepy, muscular, the great beast had moved. Alex walked across its back to his bench, sat.

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On the far lateral moraine some gravel slid down. Puffs of brown dust in the air.

He read his books. *The Odyssey* was strange but interesting. Father had told him some of the story before. *The Colossus of Maroussi* was long-winded but funny—it reminded Alex of his uncle, who could turn the smallest incident into an hour's comic monologue. What he could have made of Stella's flight up the tree! Alex laughed to think of it. But his uncle was in jail.

He sat on his bench and read, stopped occasionally to look around. When the hand holding the book got cold, he changed hands and put the cold one in a pocket of his down jacket. When both hands were blue he hid the books in rocks under his bench and went home.

There were more bags of books to be sold at Antonio's and other shops in Cambridge. Each time Alex rotated out a few that looked interesting, and replaced them with the ones on the glacier. He daydreamed of saving all the books and earning the money some other way—then presenting his father with the lost library, at some future undefined but appropriate moment.

Eventually Stella forgave him for rescuing her. She came to enjoy chasing a piece of yarn up and down their long narrow hallway, skidding around the corner by the study. It reminded them of a game they had played with Pongo, who would chase anything, and they laughed at her, especially when she jerked to a halt and licked her fur fastidiously, as if she had never been carousing. "You can't fool us, Stell! We *remember!*"

Mom sold most of her music collection, except for her favorites. Once Alex went out to the glacier with the *Concerto de Aranjuez* coursing through him—Mom had had it on in the apartment while she worked. He hummed the big theme of the second movement as he crunched over the ice: clearly it was the theme of the glacier, the glacier's song. How had a blind composer managed to capture the windy sweep of it, the spaciousness? Perhaps such things could be heard as well as seen. The wind said it, whistling over the ice. It was a terrifically dark day, windy, snowing in gusts. He could walk right up the middle of the great tongue, between the rubble lines; no one else would be up there today. Da-da-da . . . da da da da da da, da-da-da. . . . Hands in pockets, chin on chest, he trudged into the wind humming, feeling like the whole world was right there around him. It was too cold to stay in his shelter for more than a minute.

Father went off on trips, exploring possibilities. One morning Alex woke to the sound of *The Pirates of Penzance*. This was one of their favorites, Mom played it all the time while working and on Saturday

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mornings, so that they knew all the lyrics by heart and often sang along. Alex especially loved the Pirate King, and could mimic all his intonations.

He dressed and walked down to the kitchen. Mom stood by the stove with her back to him, singing along. It was a sunny morning and their big kitchen windows faced east; the light poured in on the sink and the dishes and the white stove and the linoleum and the plants in the window and Stella, sitting contentedly on the window sill listening.

His mom was tall and broad-shouldered. Every year she cut her hair shorter; now it was just a cap of tight brown curls, with a somewhat longer patch down the nape of her neck. That would go soon, Alex thought, and then her hair would be as short as it could be. She was lost in the song, one slim hand on the white stove top, looking out the window. She had a low, rich, thrilling voice, like a real singer's only prettier. She was singing along with the song that Mabel sings after she finds out that Frederick won't be able to leave the pirates until 1940.

When it was over Alex entered the kitchen, went to the pantry. "That's a short one," he said.

"Yes, they had to make it short," Mom said. "There's nothing funny about that one."

One night while Father was gone on one of his trips, Mom had to go over to Ilene and Ira and Gary's apartment: Gary had been arrested, and Ilene and Ira needed help. Alex and Stella were left alone.

Stella wandered the silent apartment miaowing. "I *know,* Stella," Alex said in exasperation. "They're *gone.* They'll be back tomorrow." The cat paid no attention to him.

He went into Father's study. Tonight he'd be able to read something in relative warmth. It would only be necessary to be *very careful.*

The bookshelves were empty. Alex stood before them, mouth open. He had no idea they had sold that many of them. There were a couple left on Father's desk, but he didn't want to move them. They appeared to be dictionaries anyway. "It's all Greek to me."

He went back to the living room and got out the yarn bag, tried to interest Stella in a game. She wouldn't play. She wouldn't sit on his lap. She wouldn't stop miaowing. "Stella, shut up!" She scampered away and kept crying. Vexed, he got out the jar of catnip and spread some on the linoleum in the kitchen. Stella came running to sniff at it, then roll in it. Afterwards she played with the yarn wildly, until it caught around her tail and she froze, staring at him in a drugged paranoia. Then she dashed to her refuge and refused to come out. Finally Alex put on *The Pirates of Penzance* and listened to it for a while. After that he was sleepy.

* * *

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They got a good lawyer for Gary, Mom said. Everyone was hopeful. Then a couple of weeks later Father got a new job; he called them from work to tell them about it.

"Where is it?" Alex asked Mom when she was off the phone.

"In Kansas."

"So we will be moving."

"Yes," Mom said. "Another move."

"Will there be glaciers there too?"

"I think so. In the hills. Not as big as ours here, maybe. But there are glaciers everywhere."

He walked onto the ice one last time. There was a thin crust of snow on the tops of everything. A fantastically jumbled field of snow. It was a clear day, the sky a very pale blue, the white expanse of the glacier painfully bright. A few cirrus clouds made sickles high in the west. The snow was melting a bit and there were water droplets all over, with little sparks of colored light in each drip. The sounds of water melting were everywhere, drips, gurgles, splashes. The intensity of light was stunning, like a blow to the brain, right through the eyes. It pulsed.

The crevasse in front of his shelter had widened, and the boards of his bench had fallen. The wall of ice turning around the boulder was splintered, and shards of bright ice lay over the planks.

The glacier was moving. The glacier was alive. No heated dam would stop it. He felt its presence, huge and supple under him, seeping into him like the cold through his wet shoes, filling him up. He blinked, nearly blinded by the light breaking everywhere on it, a surgical glare that made every snow-capped rock stand out like the color red on a slide transparency. The white light. In the distance the ice cracked hollowly, moving somewhere. Everything moved: the ice, the wind, the clouds, the sun, the planet. All of it rolling around.

As they packed up their possessions Alex could hear them in the next room. "We can't," Father said. "You know we can't. They won't let us."

When they were done the apartment looked odd. Bare walls, bare wood floors. It looked smaller. Alex walked the length of it: his parents' room overlooking Chester Street; his room; his father's study; the living room; the kitchen with its fine morning light. The pantry. Stella wandered the place miaowing. Her blanket was still in its corner, but without the table it looked moth-eaten, fur-coated, ineffectual. Alex picked her up and went through the pantry, up the back stairs to the roof.

Snow had drifted into the corners. Alex walked in circles, looking at the city. Stella sat on her paws by the stairwell shed, watching him, her fur ruffled by the wind.

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Around the shed snow had melted, then froze again. Little puddles of ice ran in flat curves across the the pebbled tar paper. Alex crouched to inspect them, tapping one speculatively with a fingernail. He stood up and looked west, but buildings and bare treetops obscured the view.

Stella fought to stay out of the box, and once in it she cried miserably.

Father was already in Kansas, starting the new job. Alex and Mom and Stella had been staying in the living room of Michael Wu's place while Mom finished her work; now she was done, it was moving day, they were off to the train. But first they had to take Stella to the Talbots'.

Alex carried the box and followed Mom as they walked across the Commons and down Comm Ave. He could feel the cat shifting over her blanket; scrabbling at the cardboard against his chest. Mom walked fast, a bit ahead of him. At Kenmore they turned south.

When they got to the Talbots', Mom took the box. She looked at him. "Why don't you stay down here," she said.

"Okay."

She rang the bell and went in with the buzzer, holding the box under one arm.

Alex sat on the steps of the walk-up. There were little ones in the corner: flat fingers of ice, spilling away from the cracks.

Mom came out the door. Her face was pale, she was biting her lip. They took off walking at a fast pace. Suddenly Mom said, "Oh, Alex, she was *so scared,*" and sat down on another stoop and put her head on her knees.

Alex sat beside her, his shoulders touching hers. Don't say anything, don't put arm around shoulders or anything. He had learned this from Father. Just sit there, be there. Alex sat there like the glacier, shifting a little. Alive. The white light.

After a while she stood. "Let's go," she said.

They walked up Comm Ave. toward the train station. "She'll be all right with the Talbots," Alex said. "She already likes Jay."

"I know." Mom sniffed, tossed her head in the wind. "She's getting to be a pretty adaptable cat." They walked on in silence. She put an arm over his shoulders. "I wonder how Pongo is doing." She took a deep breath. Overhead clouds tumbled like chunks of broken ice. ●

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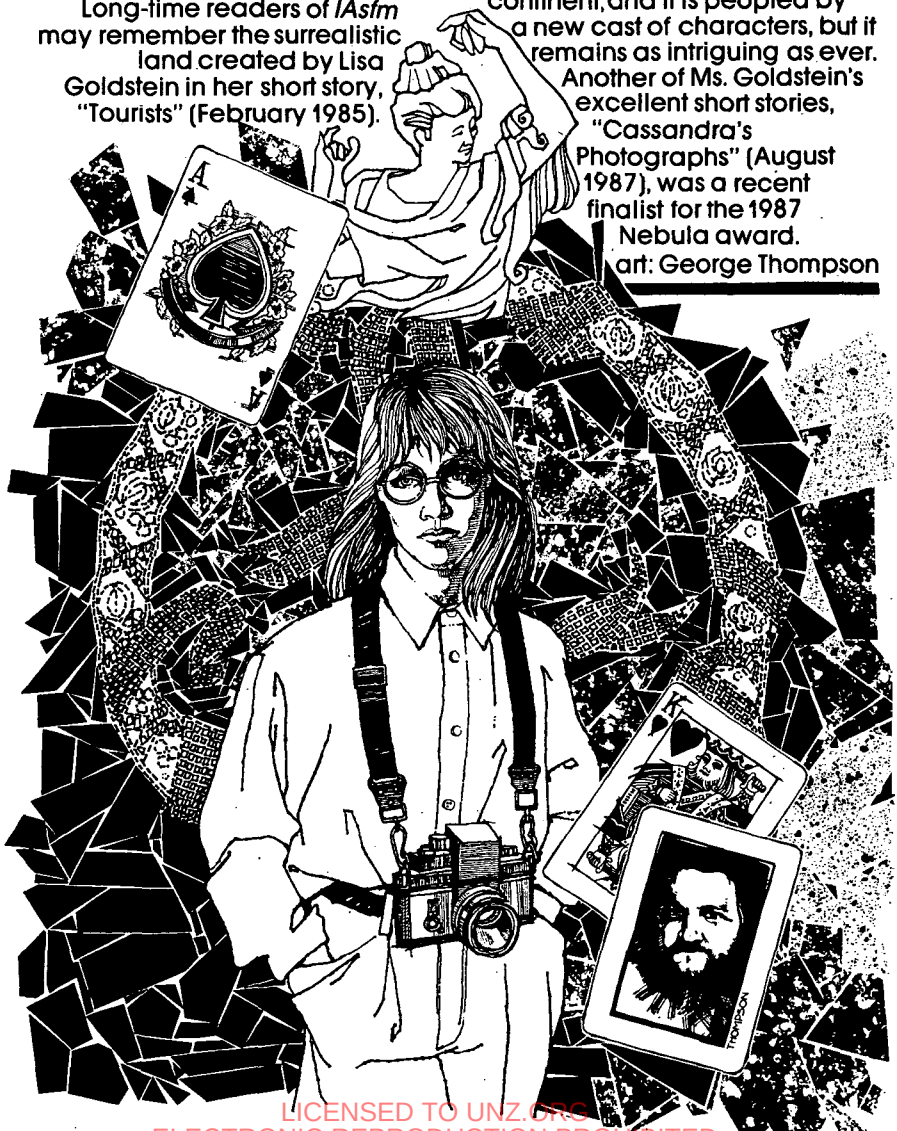
DEATH IS DIFFERENT

by Lisa Goldstein

Long-time readers of *IAsfm* may remember the surrealistic land created by Lisa Goldstein in her short story, "Tourists" (February 1985). That land has now moved to a new continent, and it is peopled by a new cast of characters, but it remains as intriguing as ever. Another of Ms. Goldstein's excellent short stories, "Cassandra's Photographs" (August 1987), was a recent finalist for the 1987 Nebula award.

art: George Thompson



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She had her passport stamped and went down the narrow corridor to collect her suitcase. It was almost as if they'd been waiting for her, dozens of them, the women dressed in embroidered shawls and long skirts in primary colors, the men in clothes that had been popular in the United States fifty or sixty years ago.

"Taxi? Taxi to hotel?"

"Change money? Yes? Change money?"

"Jewels, silver, jewels—"

"Special for you—"

"Cards, very holy—"

Monica brushed past them. One very young man, shorter even than she was, grabbed hold of the jacket she had folded over her arm. "Anything, *mem,*" he said. She turned to look at him. His eyes were wide and earnest. "Anything, I will do anything for you. You do not even have to pay me."

She laughed. He drew back, looking hurt, but his hand still held her jacket. "All right," she said. They were nearly to the wide glass doors leading out into the street. The airport was hot and dry, but the heat coming from the open glass doors was worse. It was almost evening. "Find me a newspaper," she said.

He stood a moment. The others had dropped back, as if the young man had staked a claim on her. "A—a newspaper?" he said. He was wearing a gold earring, a five-pointed star, in one ear.

"Yeah," she said. Had she ever known the Lurqazi word for newspaper? She looked in her purse for her dictionary and realized she must have packed it in her luggage. She could only stand there and repeat helplessly, "A newspaper. You know."

"Yes. A newspaper." His eyes lit up, and he pulled her by her jacket outside into the street.

"Wait—" she said. "My luggage—"

"A newspaper," the young man said. "Yes." He led her to an old man squatting by the road, a pile of newspapers in front of him. At least she supposed they were newspapers. They were written in Lurqazi, a language which used the Roman alphabet but which, she had been told, had no connection with any Indo-European tongue.

"I meant—is there an English newspaper?" she asked.

"English," he said. He looked defeated.

"All right," she said. "How much?" she asked the old man.

The old man seemed to come alive. "Just one, *mem,*" he said. "Just one." His teeth were stained red.

She gave him a one (she had changed some money at the San Francisco airport), and, as an afterthought, gave the young man a one too. She picked up a paper and turned to the young man. "Could you come back

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in there with me while I pick up my suitcase?" she said. "I think the horde will descend if you don't."

He looked at her as if he didn't understand what she'd said, but he followed her inside anyway and waited until she got her suitcase. Then he went back outside with her. She stood a long time watching the cabs—every make and year of car was standing out at the curb, it seemed, including a car she recognized from Czechoslovakia and a horse-drawn carriage—until he guided her toward a late model Volkswagen Rabbit. She had a moment of panic when she thought he was going to get in the car with her, but he just said something to the driver and waved goodbye. The driver, she noticed, was wearing the same five-pointed star earring.

As they drove to the hotel she felt the familiar travel euphoria, a loosening of the fear of new places she had felt on the plane. She had done it. She was in another place, a place she had never been, ready for new sights and adventures. Nothing untoward had happened to her yet. She was a seasoned traveler.

She looked out of the car and was startled for a moment to see auto lights flying halfway into the air, buildings standing on nothing. Then she realized she was looking at a reflection in the car's window. She bent closer to the window, put her hands around her eyes, but she could see nothing real outside, only the flying lights, the phantom buildings.

At the air-conditioned hotel she kicked off her shoes, took out her dictionary and opened the newspaper. She had studied a little Lurqazi before she'd left the States, but most of the words in the paper were unfamiliar, literary words like "burnished" and "celestial." She took out a pen and started writing above the lines. After a long time she was pretty sure that the right margins of the columns in the paper were ragged not because of some flaw in the printing process but because she was reading poetry. The old man had sold her poetry.

She laughed and began to unpack, turning on the radio. For a wonder someone was speaking English. She stopped and listened as the announcer said, ". . . fighting continues in the hills with victory claimed by both sides. In the United States the president pledged support today against what he called Russian-backed guerrillas. The Soviet Union had no comment.

"The weather continues hot—"

Something flat and white stuck out from under the shoes in her suitcase, a piece of paper. She pulled it out. "Dear Monica," she read, "I know this is part of your job but don't forget your husband who's waiting for you at home. I know you want to have adventures, but please *be careful.* See you in two weeks. I love you. I miss you already, and you haven't even gone yet. Love, Jeremy."

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* * *

The dinner where she'd met Jeremy had been for six couples. On Jeremy's other side was a small blond woman. On her other side was a conspicuously empty chair. She must have looked unhappy, because Jeremy introduced himself and asked, in a voice that sounded genuinely worried, if she was all right.

"I'm fine," she said brightly. She looked at the empty chair on the other side of her as if it were a person and then turned back to Jeremy. "He said he might be a little late. He does deep sea salvaging." And then she burst into tears.

That had been embarrassing enough, but somehow, after he had offered her his napkin and she'd refused it and used hers instead, she found herself telling him the long sad chronology of her love life. The man she was dating had promised to come, she said, but you could never count on him to be anywhere. And the one before that had smuggled drugs, and the one before that had taken her to some kind of religious commune where you weren't allowed to use electricity and could only bathe once a week, and the one before that had said he was a revolutionary. . . . His open face was friendly, his green eyes looked concerned. She thought the blond woman on his other side was very lucky. But she could never go out with him, even if the blond woman wasn't there. He was too . . . safe.

"It sounds to me," he said when she was done (and she realized guiltily that she had talked for nearly half an hour; he must have been bored out of his mind), "that you like going out with men who have adventures."

"You mean," she said slowly, watching the thought surface as she said it, "that I don't think women can have adventures too?"

The next day she applied to journalism school.

She didn't see him until nearly a year later, at the house of the couple who had invited them both to dinner. This time only the two of them were invited. The set-up was a little too obvious to ignore, but she decided she didn't mind. "What have you been doing?" he asked between courses.

"Going to journalism school," she said.

He seemed delighted. "Have you been thinking of the conversation we had last year?" he asked. "I've thought about it a lot."

"What conversation?"

"Don't you remember?" he asked. "At the dinner last year. About women having adventures. You didn't seem to think they could."

"No," she said. "I'm sorry. I don't remember."

He didn't press it, but she became annoyed with him anyway. Imagine him thinking that a conversation with him was responsible for her going to journalism school. And now that she was looking at him she realized that he was going bald, that his bald spot had widened quite a bit since

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she'd seen him last. Still, when he asked for her phone number at the end of the evening she gave it to him. What the hell.

It was months later that he confessed he had asked their mutual friends to invite them both to dinner. But it was only after they were married she admitted that he might have been right, that she might have enrolled in school because of him.

For a while, since he didn't seem to mind, since he neither praised nor blamed, she told him about her old lovers. The stories became a kind of exorcism for her. The men had all been poor (except, for a brief time, the drug smuggler, until his habit exceeded his supply), they had all been interesting, they had all been crazy or nearly so. Once he mixed up the revolutionary who had stolen her stereo with the would-be writer who had also stolen her stereo, and they'd laughed about it for days. After that the chorus line of old lovers had faded, grown less insistent, and had finally disappeared altogether. And that was when she knew something she had not been certain of before. She had been right to marry Jeremy.

The radio was playing what sounded like an old English folk song. She turned it off, read and reread the short letter until she memorized it, and went to sleep.

The young man was on the sidewalk when she stepped out of the hotel the next morning. "What can I do for you today, *men?*" he asked. "Anything."

She laughed, but she wondered what he wanted, why he had followed her. She felt uneasy. "I don't—I don't really need anything right now," she said. "Thanks."

"Anything," he said. He was earnest but not pleading. "What would you desire most if you could have anything at all? Sincerely."

"Anything," she said. You mean, besides wanting Jeremy here with me right now, she thought. Should she confide in him? It would get rid of him, anyway. "I want," she said slowly, "to talk to the head of the Communist party."

"It will be done," he said. She almost laughed, but could not bear to damage his fragile dignity. "I will see you tomorrow with your appointment," he said, and walked away.

She watched him go, then opened her guidebook and began to look through it. A travel magazine had commissioned her to do a piece on the largest city in Amaz, the ruins, the beaches, the marketplace, the famous park designed by Antonio Gaudí. How was the country holding up under the attack by the guerrillas, under the loss of the income from tourists which was its major source of revenue? "Don't go out of the city," the magazine editor had said. "Be careful. I don't want you to get killed doing

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this." Five hours later, when she'd told him about the assignment, Jeremy had repeated the editor's warning almost word for word.

But she had other ideas. As long as the magazine was paying her travel expenses she might as well look around a bit. And if she could find out if the Russians were arming the guerrillas or not, well, that would be a major scoop, wouldn't it? No one had seen the head of the Communist party for months. There were rumors that he was dead, that he was with the guerrillas in the hills, that the party itself was about to be outlawed and that he had fled to Moscow. She laughed. Wouldn't it be funny if the young man could get her an interview?

She began to walk, stopping every so often to take notes or snap a picture. The morning was humid, a portent of the heat to come. Her blouse clung to her back. She passed fish stalls, beggars, a building of white marble big as a city block she supposed was a church, a used car lot, a section of the city gutted by fire. On the street, traffic had come to a standstill, and the smells of exhaust and asphalt mingled with that of fish and cinnamon. Cars honked furiously, as though that would get them moving again. The sidewalk had filled with people moving with a leisured grace. Silver bracelets and rings flashed in the sunlight. Once she came face to face with a man carrying a monkey on his shoulder, but he was gone before she could take his picture.

She took a wrong turn somewhere and asked a few people in Lurqazi where the Gaudí Park was. No one, it seemed, had ever heard of it, but everyone wanted to talk to her, a long stream of Lurqazi she could not understand. She smiled and moved on, and looked at the map in the guidebook. Most of the streets, she read, were unnamed, so the guidebook had rather unimaginatively called them Street 1, Street 2, and so on. After a long time of walking she found the park and sat gratefully on a bench.

The benches were wavy instead of straight, made of a mosaic of broken tile and topped with grotesque and fanciful figures. The park looked a little like Gaudí's Guell Park in Barcelona, but with harsher colors, more adapted, she thought, to this country. She was trying to turn the thought into a caption for a photograph, and at the same time wondering about the structure on the other side of the park—was it a house? a sculpture of flame made of orange tile and brass?—when a small dirty boy sat on the bench next to her.

"Cards?" he asked. "Buy a pack of cards?" He took a few torn and bent cards from his pocket and spread them out in the space between the two of them.

"No thanks," she said absently.

"Very good buy," he said, tapping one of the cards. It showed a man with a square, neatly trimmed beard framing a dark face. His eyes, large

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with beautiful lashes, seemed to stare at her from the card. He looked a little like Cumaq, the head of the Communist party. No, she thought. You have Cumaq on the brain. "Very good," the boy said insistently.

"No," she said. "Thanks."

"I can tell time by the sun," the boy said suddenly. He bent his head way back, further than necessary, she thought, to see the sun, and said gravely, "It is one o'clock."

She laughed and looked at her watch. It was 11:30. "Well, if it's that late," she said, "I have to go." She got up and started over to the other side of the park.

"I can get more cards!" the boy said, calling after her. "Newer. Better!"

She got back to the hotel late in the evening. The overseas operator was busy and she went down to the hotel restaurant for dinner. Back in her room she began to write. "Why Antonio Gaudí accepted the old silver baron's commission in 1910 no one really knows, but the result—"

The phone rang. It was Jeremy. "I love you," they told each other, raising their voices above the wailing of a bad connection. "I miss you."

"Be careful," Jeremy said. The phone howled.

"I am," she said.

The young man was waiting for her outside the hotel the next morning. "I did it," he said. "All arranged." He pronounced "arranged" with three syllables.

"You did what?" she asked.

"The interview," he said. "It is all arranged. For tomorrow."

"Interview?"

"The one you asked for," he said gravely. "With Cumaq. The head of the Communist party."

"You arranged it?" she said. "An interview?"

"Yes," he said. Was he starting to sound impatient? "You asked me to and I did it. Here." He held out a piece of paper with something written on it. "For tomorrow. Ten o'clock."

She took the paper and read the ten or twelve lines of directions on it, what they had in this crazy place instead of addresses, she supposed. She didn't know whether to laugh or to throw her arms around him and hug him. Could this slight young man really have gotten her an interview with the man everyone had been trying to find for the past six months? Or was it a hoax? Some kind of trap? She knew one thing: nothing was going to keep her from following the directions the next morning. "Thank you," she said finally.

He stood as if waiting for more. She opened her purse and gave him a five. He nodded and walked away.

But that night, listening to the English news in her hotel room, she

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realized that there would be no interview, the next day or ever. "Government troops killed Communist party head Cumaq and fifteen other people, alleged to be Communist party members, in fighting in the Old Quarter yesterday," the announcer said. "Acting on an anonymous tip the troops surrounded a building in the Old Quarter late last night. Everyone inside the building was killed, according to a government spokesman."

She threw her pen across the room in frustration. So that was it. No doubt the young man had heard about Cumaq's death this morning on the Lurqazi broadcasts (But were there Lurqazi broadcasts? She had never heard one.) and had seen the opportunity to make some money off her. She thought of his earnest young face and began to get angry. So far he had sold her a sheet of poetry she couldn't read and some completely useless information. If she saw him again tomorrow she would tell him to get lost.

But he wasn't in front of the hotel the next day. She went off to the Colonial House, built in layers of Spanish, English, and Dutch architecture, one layer for each foreign occupation. The place had been given four stars by the guidebook, but now it was nearly empty. As she walked through the cool white stucco rooms, her feet clattering on the polished wooden floors, as she snapped pictures and took notes, she thought about the piece of paper, still in her purse, that he had given her. Should she follow the directions anyway and see where they led her? Probably they were as useless as everything else the young man had given her, they would lead her into a maze that would take her to the fish stalls or back to her hotel. But time was running out. Just ten more days, ten days until she had to go back, and she was no closer to the secret of the rebels. Maybe she should follow the directions after all.

She got back to the hotel late in the afternoon, hot and tired and hungry. The young man was standing in the marble portico. She tried to brush past him but he stopped her. "Why were you not at the interview this morning?" he asked.

She looked at him in disbelief. "The interview?" she said. "The man's dead. How the hell could I have interviewed him? I mean, I know you don't read the papers—hell, you probably don't even have newspapers, just that poetry crap—but don't you at least listen to the radio? They got him last night."

He drew himself up. He looked offended, mortally wounded, and at the same time faintly comic. She saw for the first time that he was trying to grow a mustache. "We," he said, gesturing grandly, "are a nation of poets. That is why we read poetry instead of newspapers. For news we—"

"You read poetry?" she said. All her anger was spilling out now; the slightest word from him could infuriate her. How dare he make a fool

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of her? "I'd like to see that. There's ninety percent illiteracy in this country, did you know that?"

"Those who can read read the poems to us," he said. "And then we make up new poems. In our villages, late at night, after the planting has been done. We have no television. Television makes you lazy and stupid. I would have invited you to my village, to hear the poems. But no longer. You have not followed my directions."

"I didn't follow your directions because the man was dead," she said. "Can't you understand that? Can't you get that through your head? Dead. There wouldn't have been much of an interview."

He was looking offended again. "Death is different in this country," he said.

"Oh, I see," she said. "You don't have television and you don't have death. That's very clever. Someday you should tell me just how you—"

"He will be there again tomorrow," the young man said, and walked away.

She felt faintly ridiculous, but she followed the directions he had given her the next day. She turned left at the statue, right at the building gutted by fire, left again at the large intersection. Maybe what the young man had been trying to tell her was that Cumaq was still alive, that he had somehow survived the shooting in the Old Quarter. But every major radio station, including those with Communist leanings, had reported Cumaq's death. Well, maybe the Communists wanted everyone to think he was dead. But then why were they giving her this interview?

The directions brought her to an old, sagging three-story building. The map in the guidebook had lost her three turns back: according to the guidebook the street she was standing on didn't exist. But as near as she could tell she was nowhere near the Old Quarter. She shrugged and started up the wooden steps to the building. A board creaked ominously beneath her.

She knocked on the door, knocked again when no one came. The door opened. She was not at all surprised to see the young man from the airport. Here's where he beats me up and takes my traveler's checks, she thought, but he motioned her in with broad gestures, grinning widely.

"Ah, come in, come in," he said. "It is important to be in the right place, no? Not in the wrong place."

She couldn't think of any answer to this and shrugged instead. "Where is he?" she asked, stepping inside and trying to adjust her eyes to the dim light.

"He is here," he said. "Right in front of you."

Now she could see another man in a chair, and two men standing close behind him. She took a few steps forward. The man in the chair looked like all the pictures of Cumaq she had ever seen, the neat beard, the long

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eyelashes. Her heart started to beat faster and she ignored the peeling paint and spiderwebs on the walls, the boarded-over windows, the plaster missing from the ceiling. She would get her scoop after all, and it was better than she ever thought it would be.

The young man introduced her to Cumaq in Lurqazi. "How did you survive the shooting in the Old Quarter?" she asked the man in the chair.

Cumaq turned his head toward her. He was wearing the same earring as the young man and the taxi driver at the airport, a gold five-pointed star. "He does not speak English," the young man said. "I will translate." He said something to Cumaq and Cumaq answered him.

"He says," the young man said, "that he did not survive. That he came back from the dead to be with us."

"But how?" she asked. Her frustration returned. The young man could be making up anything, anything at all. The man in the chair had no wounds that she could see. Could he be an impostor, not Cumaq after all? "What do you mean by coming back from the dead? I thought you people were Marxists. I thought you didn't believe in life after death, things like that."

"We are mystical Marxists," the young man translated.

This was ridiculous. Suddenly she remembered her first travel assignment, covering the centenary of Karl Marx's death. She had gone to Marx's grave in Highgate Cemetery in London and taken pictures of the solemn group of Chinese standing around the grave. A week later she had gone back, and the Chinese group—the same people? different people? the same uniforms, anyway—was still there. Now she imagined the group standing back, horrified, as a sound came from the tomb, the sound of Marx turning in his grave. "What on earth is a mystical Marxist?"

The man in the chair said two words. "Magicians," the young man said. "Wizards."

She was not getting anywhere following this line of questioning. "Are the Russians giving you arms?" she asked. "Can you at least tell me that?"

"What is necessary comes to us," the young man said after Cumaq had finished.

That sounded so much like something the young man would have said on his own that she couldn't believe he was translating Cumaq faithfully. "But what is necessary comes . . . from the Russians?" she asked. She waited for the young man to translate.

Cumaq shrugged.

She sighed. "Can I take a picture?" she asked. "Show the world you're still alive?"

"No," the young man said. "No pictures."

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An hour later she was still not sure if she had a story. Cumaq—if it really was Cumaq—spoke for most of that time, mixing Marxist rhetoric about the poor downtrodden masses with a vague, almost fatalistic belief that the world was working on his side. "You see," he said, "it is as Marx said. Our victory is inevitable. And our astrologers say the same thing." She wondered what they made of him in Moscow, if he had ever been to Moscow.

"You must go now," the young man said. "He has been on a long journey. He must rest now."

"How about some proof?" she asked. "Some proof that he isn't dead?"

"He spoke to you," the young man said. "That is proof enough, surely."

"No one will believe me," she said. "I can't sell this story anywhere without proof. A picture, or—"

"No," the young man said. "You must leave now."

She sighed and left.

The next day she rented a car and drove to the beaches, took pictures of the white sand, the tropical blue water, the palm trees. The huge air-conditioned hotels facing the water were nearly empty, standing like monuments to a forgotten dynasty. In one the elevators didn't run. In another the large plate-glass window in the lobby had been broken and never replaced.

She stayed at one of the hotels and took the car the next day to the ruins of Marmaz. Even here the tourists had stayed away. Only a few were walking through the echoing marble halls, sticking close together like the stunned survivors of a disaster. A man who spoke excellent English was leading a disheartened-looking group of Americans on a tour.

She and the tour finished at the same place, the central chamber with its cracked and empty pool made of white marble. "Tour, miss?" the guide asked her. "The next one starts in half an hour."

"No, thank you," she said. They stood together looking at the pool. "Your English is very good," she said finally.

He laughed. "That's because I'm American," he said. "My name's Charles."

She turned to him in surprise. "How on earth did you end up here?" she asked.

"It's a long story," he said.

"Well, can you tell me—?" she asked.

"Probably not," he said. They both laughed. Ghosts of their laughter came back to them from the marble pool.

"How do people get news around here?" she said. "I mean, the only broadcasts I can find on the radio are foreign, the United States and

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China, mostly, and what I thought was a newspaper turns out to be poetry, I think. . . . "

He nodded. "Yeah, they're big on poetry here," he said. "They get their news from the cards."

"The—cards?"

"Sure," he said. "Haven't you had half a dozen people try to sell you a deck of cards since you got here? Used to sell them myself for a while. That's their newspaper. And—other things."

She was silent a moment, thinking about the boy who had tried to sell her the deck of cards, the card with Cumaq's picture, the boy shouting after her that he could get newer cards. "So that's it," she said. "It doesn't seem very, well, accurate."

"Not a lot out here is accurate," Charles said. "Sometimes I think accuracy is something invented by the Americans."

"Well, what about—" She hesitated. How much could she tell him without him thinking she was crazy? "Well, someone, a native, told me that death is different in this country. What do you think he meant?"

"Just what he said, I guess," he said. "Lots of things are different here. It's hard to—to pin things down. You have to learn to stop looking for rational explanations."

"I guess I'll never make it here, then," she said. "I'm a journalist. We're always looking for rational explanations."

"Yeah, I know," he said. "It's a hard habit to break."

She did a short interview with him— "How has the shortage of tourists affected your job as a guide to the ruins?"—and then she drove back to the city.

In the next few days she tried to find the shabby three-story building again. It seemed to her that the city was shifting, moving landmarks, growing statues and fountains, swallowing parks and churches. The building had vanished. She showed a taxi driver her directions, and they ended up lost in the city's maze for over two hours.

She went back to the airport, but the young man was gone and no one seemed to remember who he was. The old man who had sold poetry was gone too.

And finally her time in the city was up. She packed her suitcase, read the note from Jeremy one more time, and took her plane back to San Francisco. She tried to read on the plane but thoughts of Jeremy kept intruding. She would see him in three hours, two hours, one hour. . . .

He wasn't at the airport to meet her. For an instant she was worried, and then she laughed. He was always so concerned about her safety, so protective. Now that it was her turn to be worried she would show him. She would take a taxi home and wait calmly for him to get back. No doubt there was a logical explanation.

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The apartment was dark when she let herself in, and she could see the red light blinking on their answering machine. Six blinks, six calls. For the first time she felt fear catch at her. Where was he?

"Hello, Mrs. Schwartz," the first caller said, an unfamiliar voice. She felt annoyance start to overlay her fear. She had never taken Jeremy's name. Who was this guy that he didn't know that? "This is Dr. Escobar, at the county hospital. Please give me a call. I'm afraid it's urgent."

The doctor again, asking her to call back. Then Jeremy's brother—"Hey, Jer, where the hell are you? You're late for the game." Then a familiar-sounding voice that she realized with horror was hers. But she had tried to call Jeremy *last night*. Hadn't he been home since then? Then the would-be writer—she fast-forwarded over him—and another strange voice. "Mrs. Schwartz? This is Sergeant Pierce. Your next-door neighbor tells me you're away for two weeks. Please call me at the police station when you get back."

With shaking fingers she pressed the buttons on the phone for the police station. Sergeant Pierce wasn't in, and after a long wait they told her. Jeremy had died in a car accident.

She felt nothing. She had known the moment she found herself calling the police and not the hospital.

She called a taxi. She picked up her suitcase and went outside. The minutes passed like glaciers, but finally she saw the lights of a car swing in toward the curb. She ran to the taxi and got in. "To the airport, please," she said.

At the airport she ran to the Cathay Pacific counter. "One ticket to—" Damn. She had forgotten the name of the country. She fumbled through her purse, looking for her passport. "To Amaz, please."

"To where?" the woman behind the counter said.

"Amaz. Here." She showed her the stamp in the book.

"I never heard of it," the woman said.

"I just got back this evening," Monica said. "On Cathay Pacific. Amaz. In the Far East. Do you want to see my ticket?"

The woman had backed away a little and Monica realized she had been shouting. "I'm sorry," the woman said. "Here's a list of the places we fly. See? Amaz is not one of them. Are you sure it's in the Far East?"

"Of course I'm sure," Monica said. "I just got back this evening. I told you—"

"I'm sorry," the woman said again. She turned to the next person in line. "Can I help you?"

Monica moved away. She sat on a wooden bench in the center of the echoing terminal and watched people get in line, check their gate number, run for their planes. She was too late. The magic didn't work this far away. It had been stupid, anyway, an idea born out of desperation

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and something the crazy American had said at the ruins. She would have to face reality, have to face the fact that Jeremy—

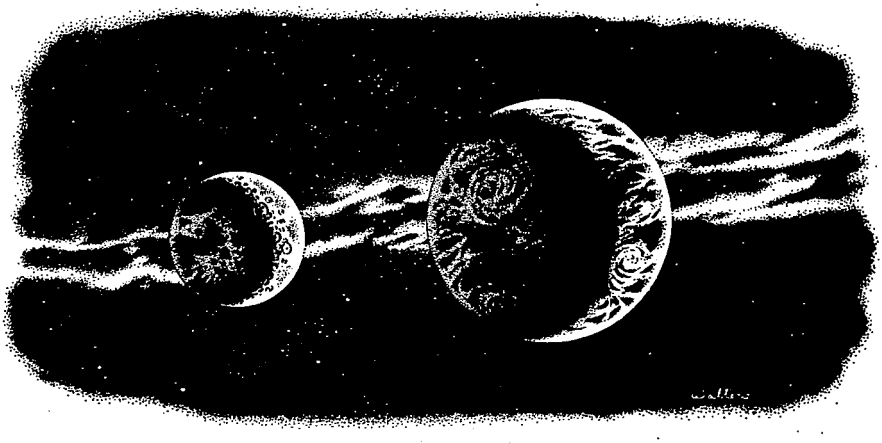
A woman walked past her. She was wearing a gold five-pointed earring in one ear. Monica stood up quickly and followed her. The woman turned a corner and walked past a few ticket windows, her heels clicking unnaturally loudly on the marble floor, and got in line at Mexicana Airlines. Monica stood behind her. The glass windows behind them were dark, and the lights of the cars and buses shone through the windows like strange pearls. "One ticket for Amaz, please," the woman said, and Monica watched with renewed hope as the clerk issued her a ticket. Amaz had apparently moved to Latin America. Monica could not bring herself to see anything very strange in that. "One ticket to Amaz, please," she said to the clerk, her voice shaking.

The plane left almost immediately. She was very tired. She leaned back in her seat and tried to sleep. Two sentences looped through her mind, like fragments of a forgotten song. "Death is different in this country." And, "You have to learn to stop looking for rational explanations." She tried not to hope too much.

She must have slept, because the next thing she knew the stewardess was shaking her awake. "We've landed," she said.

Monica picked up her suitcase and followed the others out of the plane. The landing field was almost pitch dark, but the heat of the day persisted. She went inside the terminal and had her passport stamped, and then followed the crowd down the narrow corridor.

Jeremy came up to her out of the crowd. She dropped her suitcase and ran to him, put her arms around him, held on to him as if her life depended on it. ●



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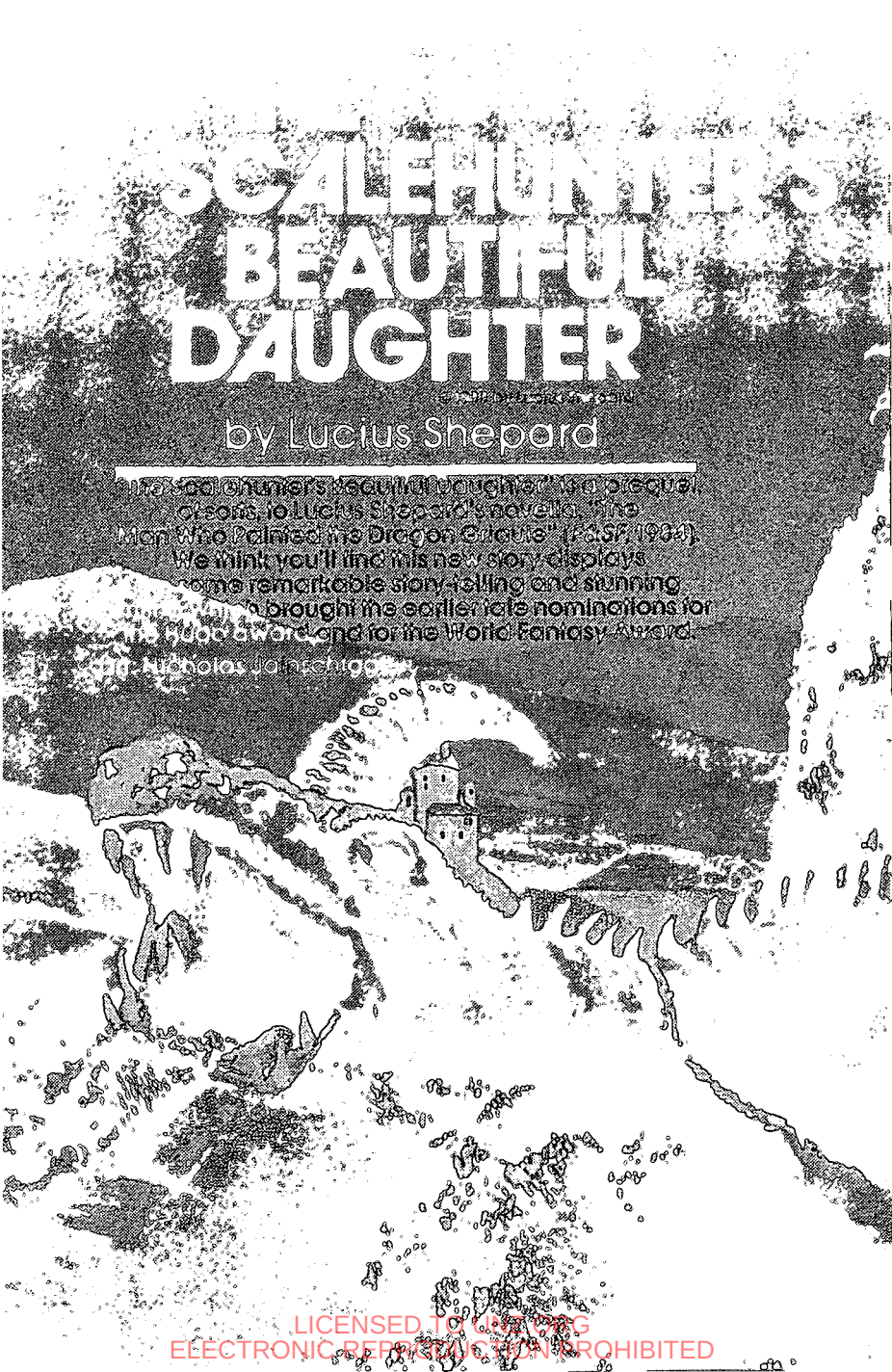
SCALE HUNTER'S BEAUTIFUL DAUGHTER

by Lucius Shepard



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1

Not long after the Christlight of the world's first morning faded, when birds still flew to heaven and back, and even the wickedest things shone like saints, so pure was their portion of evil, there was a village by the name of Hangtown that clung to the back of the dragon Griaule, a vast mile-long beast who had been struck immobile yet not lifeless by a wizard's spell, and who ruled over the Carbonales Valley, controlling in every detail the lives of the inhabitants, making known his will by the ineffable radiations emanating from the cold tonnage of his brain. From shoulder to tail, the greater part of Griaule was covered with earth and trees and grass, from some perspectives appearing to be an element of the landscape, another hill among those that ringed the valley; except for sections cleared by the scalehunters, only a portion of his right side to the haunch, and his massive neck and head remained visible, and the head had sunk to the ground, its massive jaws halfway open, itself nearly as high as the crests of the surrounding hills. Situated almost eight hundred feet above the valley floor and directly behind the fronto-parietal plate, which overhung the place like a mossy cliff, the village consisted of several dozen shacks with shingled roofs and walls of weathered planking, and bordered a lake fed by a stream that ran down onto Griaule's back from an adjoining hill; it was hemmed in against the shore by thickets of chokecherry, stands of stunted oak and hawthornes, and but for the haunted feeling that pervaded the air, a vibrant stillness similar to the atmosphere of an old ruin, to someone standing beside the lake it would seem he was looking out upon an ordinary country settlement, one a touch less neatly ordered than most, littered as it was with the bones and entrails of skizzers and flakes and other parasites that infested the dragon, but nonetheless ordinary in the lassitude that governed it, and the shabby dress and hostile attitudes of its citizenry.

Many of the inhabitants of the village were scalehunters, men and women who scavenged under Griaule's earth-encrusted wings and elsewhere on his body, searching for scales that were cracked and broken, chipping off fragments and selling these in Port Chantay, where they were valued for their medicinal virtues. They were well paid for their efforts, but were treated as pariahs by the people of the valley, who rarely ventured onto the dragon, and their lives were short and fraught with unhappy incident, a circumstance they attributed to the effects of Griaule's displeasure at their presence. Indeed, his displeasure was a constant preoccupation, and they spent much of their earnings on charms that they believed would ward off its evil influence. Some wore bits of scale around their necks, hoping that this homage would communicate to Griaule the high regard in which they held him, and perhaps the most

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extreme incidence of this way of thinking was embodied by the nurture given by the widower Riall to his daughter Catherine. On the day of her birth, also the day of his wife's death, he dug down beneath the floor of his shack until he reached Griaule's back, laying bare a patch of golden scale some six feet long and five feet wide, and from that day forth for the next eighteen years he forced her to sleep upon the scale, hoping that the dragon's essence would seep into her and so she would be protected against his wrath. Catherine complained at first about this isolation, but she came to enjoy the dreams that visited her, dreams of flying, of otherworldly climes (according to legend, dragons were native to another universe to which they traveled by flying into the sun); lying there sometimes, looking up through the plank-shored tunnel her father had dug, she would feel that she was not resting on a solid surface but was receding from the earth, falling into a golden distance.

Riall may or may not have achieved his desired end; but it was evident to the people of Hangtown that propinquity to the scale had left its mark on Catherine, for while Riall was short and swarthy (as his wife had also been), physically unprepossessing in every respect, his daughter had grown into a beautiful young woman, long-limbed and slim, with fine golden hair and lovely skin and a face of unsurpassed delicacy, seeming a lapidary creation with its voluptuous mouth and sharp cheekbones and large eloquent eyes, whose irises were so dark that they could be distinguished from the pupils only under the strongest of lights. Not alone in her beauty did she appear cut from different cloth from her parents; neither did she share their gloomy spirit and cautious approach to life. From earliest childhood she went without fear to every quarter of the dragon's surface, even into the darkness under the wing joints where few scalehunters dared go; she believed she had been immunized against ordinary dangers by her father's tactics, and she felt there was a bond between herself and the dragon, that her dreams and good looks were emblems of both a magical relationship and consequential destiny, and this feeling of invulnerability—along with the confidence instilled by her beauty—gave rise to a certain egocentricity and shallowness of character. She was often disdainful, careless in the handling of lovers' hearts, and though she did not stoop to duplicity—she had no need of that—she took pleasure in stealing the men whom other women loved. And yet she considered herself a good woman. Not a saint, mind you. But she honored her father and kept the house clean and did her share of work, and though she had her faults, she had taken steps—half-steps, rather—to correct them. Like most people, she had no clear moral determinant, depending upon taboos and specific circumstances to modify her behavior, and the "good," the principled, was to her a kind of intellectual afterlife to which she planned some day to aspire, but only after she had exhausted

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the potentials of pleasure and thus gained the experience necessary for the achievement of such an aspiration. She was prone to bouts of moodiness, as were all within the sphere of Griaule's influence, but generally displayed a sunny disposition and optimistic cast of thought. This is not to say, however, that she was a Pollyanna, an innocent. Through her life in Hangtown she was familiar with treachery, grief, and murder, and at eighteen she had already been with a wide variety of lovers. Her easy sexuality was typical of Hangtown's populace, yet because of her beauty and the jealousy it had engendered, she had acquired the reputation of being exceptionally wanton. She was amused, even somewhat pleased, by her reputation, but the rumors surrounding her grew more scurrilous, more deviant from the truth, and eventually there came a day when they were brought home to her with a savagery that she could never have presupposed.

Beyond Griaule's frontal spike, which rose from a point between his eyes, a great whorled horn curving back toward Hangtown, the slope of the skull flattened out into the top of his snout, and it was here that Catherine came one foggy morning, dressed in loose trousers and a tunic, equipped with scaling hooks and ropes and chisels, intending to chip off a sizeable piece of cracked scale she had noticed near the dragon's lip, a spot directly above one of the fangs. She worked at the piece for several hours, suspended by linkages of rope over Griaule's lower jaw. His half-open mouth was filled with a garden of evil-looking plants, the calloused surface of his forked tongue showing here and there between the leaves like nodes of red coral; his fangs were inscribed with intricate patterns of lichen, wreathed by streamers of fog and circled by raptors who now and then would plummet into the bushes to skewer some unfortunate lizard or vole. Epiphytes bloomed from splits in the ivory, depending long strings of interwoven red and purple blossoms. It was a compelling sight, and from time to time Catherine would stop working and lower herself in her harness until she was no more than fifty feet above the tops of the bushes and look off into the caliginous depths of Griaule's throat, wondering at the nature of the shadowy creatures that flitted there.

The sun burned off the fog, and Catherine, sweaty, weary of chipping, hauled herself up to the top of the snout and stretched out on the scales, resting on an elbow, nibbling at a honey pear and gazing out over the valley with its spiny green hills and hammocks of thistle palms and the faraway white buildings of Teocinte, where that very night she planned to dance and make love. The air became so warm that she stripped off her tunic and lay back, bare to the waist, eyes closed, daydreaming in the clean springtime heat. She had been drifting between sleep and waking for the better part of an hour, when a scraping noise brought her alert. She reached for her tunic and started to sit up; but before she

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could turn to see who or what had made the sound, something fell heavily across her ribs, taking her wind, leaving her gasping and disoriented. A hand groped her breast, and she smelled winey breath.

"Go easy, now," said a man's voice, thickened with urgency. "I don't want nothing half of Hangtown ain't had already."

Catherine twisted her head, and caught a glimpse of Key Willen's lean, sallow face looming above her, his sardonic mouth hitched at one corner in a half-smile.

"I told you we'd have our time," he said, fumbling with the tie of her trousers.

She began to fight desperately, clawing at his eyes, catching a handful of his long black hair and yanking. She threw herself onto her stomach, clutching at the edge of a scale, trying to worm out from beneath him; but he butted her in the temple, sending white lights shooting through her skull. Once her head had cleared, she found that he had flipped her onto her back, had pulled her trousers down past her hips and penetrated her with his fingers; he was working them in and out, his breath coming hoarse and rapid. She felt raw inside, and she let out a sharp, throat-tearing scream. She thrashed about, tearing at his shirt, his hair, screaming again and again, and when he clamped his free hand to her mouth, she bit it.

"You bitch! You . . . goddamn. . . ." He slammed the back of her head against the scale, climbed atop her, straddling her chest and pinning her shoulders with his knees. He slapped her, wrapped his hand in her hair, and leaned close, spittle flying to her face as he spoke. "You listen up, pig! I don't much care if you're awake . . . one way or the other, I'm gonna have my fun." He rammed her head into the scale again. "You hear me? Hear me?" He straightened, slapped her harder. "Hell, I'm having fun right now."

"Please!" she said, dazed.

"Please?" He laughed. "That mean you want some more?" Another slap. "You like it?"

Yet another slap.

"How 'bout that?"

Frantic, she wrenched an arm free, in reflex reaching up behind her head, searching for a weapon, anything, and as he prepared to slap her again, grinning, she caught hold of a stick—or so she thought—and swung it at him in a vicious arc. The point of the scaling hook, for such it was, sank into Key's flesh just back of his left eye, and as he fell, toppling sideways with only the briefest of outcries, the eye filled with blood, becoming a featureless crimson sphere like a rubber ball embedded in the socket. Catherine shrieked, pushed his legs off her waist and scrambled away, encumbered by her trousers, which had slipped down

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about her knees. Key's body convulsed, his heels drumming the scale. She sat staring at him for a long seamless time, unable to catch her breath, to think. But swarms of black flies, their translucent wings shattering the sunlight into prism, began landing on the puddle of blood that spread wide as a table from beneath Key's face, and she became queasy. She crawled to the edge of the snout and looked away across the checkerboard of fields below toward Port Chantay, toward an alp of bubbling cumulus building from the horizon. Her chest hollowed with cold, and she started to shake. The tremors passing through her echoed the tremor she had felt in Key's body when the hook had bit into his skull. All the sickness inside her, her shock and disgust at the violation, at confronting the substance of death, welled up in her throat and her stomach emptied. When she had finished she cinched her trousers tight, her fingers clumsy with the knot. She thought she should do something. Coil the ropes, maybe. Store the harness in her pack. But these actions, while easy to contemplate, seemed impossibly complex to carry out. She shivered and hugged herself, feeling the altitude, the distances. Her cheeks were feverish and puffy; flickers of sensation—she pictured them to be iridescent worms—tingled nerves in her chest and legs. She had the idea that everything was slowing, that time had flurried and was settling the way river mud settles after the passage of some turbulence. She stared off toward the dragon's horn. Someone was standing there. Coming toward her, now. At first she watched the figure approach with a defiant disinterest, wanting to guard her privacy, feeling that if she had to speak she would lose control of her emotions. But as the figure resolved into one of her neighbors back in Hangtown—Brianne, a tall young woman with brittle good looks, dark brown hair and an olive complexion—she relaxed from this attitude. She and Brianne were not friends; in fact, they had once been rivals for the same man. However, that had been a year and more in the past, and Catherine was relieved to see her. More than relieved. The presence of another woman allowed her to surrender to weakness, believing that in Brianne she would find a fund of natural sympathy because of their common sex.

"My God, what happened?" Brianne kneeled and brushed Catherine's hair back from her eyes. The tenderness of the gesture burst the dam of Catherine's emotions, and punctuating the story with sobs, she told of the rape.

"I didn't mean to kill him," she said. "I . . . I'd forgotten about the hook."

"Key was looking to get killed," Brianne said. "But it's a damn shame you had to be the one to help him along." She sighed, her forehead creased by a worry line. "I suppose I should fetch someone to take care of the body. I know that's not. . . ."

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"No, I understand . . . it has to be done." Catherine felt stronger, more capable. She made as if to stand, but Brianne restrained her.

"Maybe you should wait here. You know how people will be. They'll see your face"—she touched Catherine's swollen cheeks "—and they'll be prying, whispering. It might be better to let the mayor come out and make his investigation. That way he can take the edge off the gossip before it gets started."

Catherine didn't want to be alone with the body any longer, but she saw the wisdom in waiting and agreed.

"Will you be all right?" Brianne asked.

"I'll be fine . . . but hurry."

"I will." Brianne stood; the wind feathered her hair, lifted it to veil the lower half of her face. "You're sure you'll be all right?" There was an odd undertone in her voice, as if it were really another question she was asking, or—and this, Catherine thought, was more likely—as if she were thinking ahead to dealing with the mayor.

Catherine nodded, then caught at Brianne as she started to walk away. "Don't tell my father. Let me tell him. If he hears it from you, he might go after the Willens."

"I won't say a thing, I promise."

With a smile, a sympathetic pat on the arm, Brianne headed back toward Hangtown, vanishing into the thickets that sprang up beyond the frontal spike. For a while after she had gone, Catherine felt wrapped in her consolation; but the seething of the wind, the chill that infused the air as clouds moved in to cover the sun, these things caused the solitude of the place and the grimness of the circumstance to close down around her, and she began to wish she had returned to Hangtown. She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to steady herself, but even then she kept seeing Key's face, his bloody eye, and remembering his hands on her. Finally, thinking that Brianne had had more than enough time to accomplish her task, she walked up past the frontal spike and stood looking out along the narrow trail that wound through the thickets on Griaule's back. Several minutes elapsed, and then she spotted three figures—two men and a woman—coming at a brisk pace. She shaded her eyes against a ray of sun that had broken through the overcast, and peered at them. Neither man had the gray hair and portly shape of Hangtown's mayor. They were lanky, pale, with black hair falling to their shoulders, and were carrying unsheathed knives. Catherine couldn't make out their faces, but she realized that Brianne must not have set aside their old rivalry, that in the spirit of vengeance she had informed Key's brothers of his death.

Fear cut through the fog of shock, and she tried to think what to do. There was only one trail and no hope that she could hide in the thickets.

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She retreated toward the edge of the snout, stepping around the patch of drying blood. Her only chance for escape would be to lower herself on the ropes and take her refuge in Griaule's mouth; however, the thought of entering so ominous a place, a place shunned by all but the mad, gave her pause. She tried to think of alternatives, but there were none. Brianne would no doubt have lied to the Willens, cast her as the guilty party, and the brothers would never listen to her. She hurried to the edge, buckled on the harness and slipped over the side, working with frenzied speed, lowering in ten and fifteen foot drops. Her view of the mouth lurched and veered—a panorama of bristling leaves and head-high ferns, enormous fangs hooking up from the jaw and pitch-dark emptiness at the entrance to the throat. She was fifty feet from the surface when she felt the rope jerking, quivering; glancing up, she saw that one of the Willens was sawing at it with his knife. Her heart felt hot and throbbing in her chest, her palms were slick. She dropped half the distance to the jaw, stopping with a jolt that sent pain shooting through her spine and left her swinging back and forth, muddle-headed. She began another drop, a shorter one, but the rope parted high above and she fell the last twenty feet, landing with such stunning force that she lost consciousness.

She came to in a bed of ferns, staring up through the fronds at the dull brick-colored roof of Griaule's mouth, a surface festooned with spiky dark green epiphytes, like the vault of a cathedral that had been invaded by the jungle. She lay still for a moment, gathering herself, testing the aches that mapped her body to determine if anything was broken. A lump sprouted from the back of the head, but the brunt of the impact had been absorbed by her rear end, and though she felt pain there, she didn't think the damage was severe. Moving cautiously, wincing, she came to her knees and was about to stand when she heard shouts from above.

"See her?"

"Naw . . . you?"

"She musta gone deeper in!"

Catherine peeked between the fronds and saw two dark figures centering networks of ropes, suspended a hundred feet or so overhead like spiders with simple webs. They dropped lower, and panicked, she crawled on her belly away from the mouth, hauling herself along by gripping twists of dead vine that formed a matte underlying the foliage. After she had gone about fifty yards she looked back. The Willens were hanging barely a dozen feet above the tops of the bushes, and as she watched they lowered out of sight. Her instincts told her to move deeper into the mouth, but the air was considerably darker where she now kneeled than where she had landed—a grayish green gloom—and the idea of penetrating the greater darkness of Griaule's throat stalled her heart. She listened for

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the Willens and heard slitherings, skitterings, and rustles. Eerie whistles that, although soft, were complex and articulated. She imagined that these were not the cries of tiny creatures but the gutterings of breath in a huge throat, and she had a terrifying sense of the size of the place, of her own relative insignificance. She couldn't bring herself to continue in deeper, and she made her way toward the side of the mouth, where thick growths of ferns flourished in the shadow. When she reached a spot at which the mouth sloped upward, she buried herself among the ferns and kept very still.

Next to her head was an irregular patch of pale red flesh, where a clump of soil had been pulled away by an uprooted plant. Curious, she extended a forefinger and found it cool and dry. It was like touching stone or wood, and that disappointed her; she had, she realized, been hoping the touch would affect her in some extreme way. She pressed her palm to the flesh, trying to detect the tic of a pulse, but the flesh was inert, and the rustlings and the occasional beating of wings overhead were the only signs of life. She began to grow drowsy, to nod, and she fought to keep awake. But after a few minutes she let herself relax. The more she examined the situation, the more convinced she became that the Willens would not track her this far; the extent of their nerve would be to wait at the verge of the mouth, to lay siege to her, knowing that eventually she would have to seek food and water. Thinking about water made her thirsty, but she denied the craving. She needed rest far more. And removing one of the scaling hooks from her belt, holding it in her right hand in case some animal less cautious than the Willens happened by, she pillowed her head against the pale red patch of Griaule's flesh and was soon fast asleep.

2

Many of Catherine's dreams over the years had seemed sendings rather than distillations of experience, but never had she had one so clearly of that character as the dream she had that afternoon in Griaule's mouth. It was a simple dream, formless, merely a voice whose words less came to her ear than enveloped her, steeping her in their meanings, and of them she retained only a message of reassurance, of security, one so profound that it instilled in her a confidence that lasted even after she waked into a world gone black, the sole illumination being the gleams of reflected firelight that flowed along the curve of one of the fangs. It was an uncanny sight, that huge tooth glazed with fierce red shine, and under other circumstances she would have been frightened by it; but in this instance she did not react to the barbarity of the image and saw it

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instead as evidence that her suppositions concerning the Willens had been correct. They had built a fire near the lip and were watching for her, expecting her to bolt into their arms. But she had no intention of fulfilling their expectations. Although her confidence flickered on and off, although to go deeper into the dragon seemed irrational, she knew that any other course offered the certainty of a knife stroke across the neck. And, too, despite the apparent rationality of her decision, she had an unshakeable feeling that Griaule was watching over her, that his will was being effected. She had a flash vision of Key Willen's face, his gaping mouth and blood-red eye, and recalled her terror at his assault. However, these memories no longer harrowed her. They steadied her, resolving certain questions that—while she had never asked them—had always been there to ask. She hadn't been to blame in any way for the rape, she had not tempted Key. But she saw that she had left herself open to tragedy by her aimlessness, by her reliance on a vague sense of destiny to give life meaning. Now it appeared that her destiny was at hand, and she understood that its violent coloration might have been different had *she* been different, had she engaged the world with energy and not with a passive attitude. She hoped that knowing all this would prove important, but she doubted that it would, believing that she had gone too far on the wrong path for any degree of knowledge to matter.

It took all her self-control to begin her journey inward, feeling her way along the side of the throat, pushing through ferns and cobwebs, her hands encountering unfamiliar textures that made her skin crawl, alert to the burbling of insects and other night creatures. On one occasion she was close to turning back, but she heard shouts behind her, and fearful that the Willens were on her trail, she kept going. As she started down an incline, she saw a faint gleam riding the curve of the throat wall. The glow brightened, casting the foliage into silhouette, and eager to reach the source, she picked up her pace, tripping over roots, vines snagging her ankles. At length the incline flattened out, and she emerged into a large chamber, roughly circular in shape, its upper regions lost in darkness; upon the floor lay pools of black liquid; mist trailed across the surface of the pools, and whenever the mist lowered to touch the liquid, a fringe of yellowish red flame would flare up, cutting the shadows on the pebbled skin of the floor and bringing to light a number of warty knee-high protuberances that sprouted among the pools—these were deep red in color, perforated around the sides, leaking pale threads of mist. At the rear of the chamber was an opening that Catherine assumed led farther into the dragon. The air was warm, dank, and a sweat broke out all over her body. She balked at entering the chamber; in spite of the illumination, it was less a human place than the mouth. But once again she forced herself onward, stepping carefully between the fires

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and, after discovering that the mist made her giddy, giving the protuberances a wide berth. Piercing whistles came from above. The notion that this might signal the presence of bats caused her to hurry, and she had covered half the distance across when a man's voice called to her, electrifying her with fear.

"Catherine!" he said. "Not so fast!"

She spun about, her scaling hook at the ready. Hobbling toward her was an elderly white-haired man dressed in the ruin of a silk frock coat embroidered with gold thread, a tattered ruffled shirt, and holed satin leggings. In his left hand he carried a gold-knobbed cane, and at least a dozen glittering rings encircled his bony fingers. He stopped an arms-length away, leaning on his cane, and although Catherine did not lower her hook, her fear diminished. Despite the eccentricity of his appearance, considering the wide spectrum of men and creatures who inhabited Griaule, he seemed comparatively ordinary, a reason for caution but no alarm.

"Ordinary?" The old man cackled. "Oh yes, indeed! Ordinary as angels, as unexceptional as the idea of God!" Before she had a chance to wonder at his knowledge of her thoughts, he let out another cackle. "How could I not know them? We are every one of us creatures of his thought, expressions of his whim. And here what is only marginally evident on the surface becomes vivid reality, inescapable truth. For here—" he poked the chamber floor with his cane "—here we live in the medium of his will." He hobbled a step closer, fixing her with a rheumy stare. "I have dreamed this moment a thousand times. I know what you will say, what you will think, what you will do. He has instructed me in all your particulars so that I may become your guide, your confidant."

"What are you talking about?" Catherine hefted her hook, her anxiety increasing.

"Not 'what,' " said the old man. "Who." A grin split the pale wrinkled leather of his face. "His Scaliness, of course."

"Griaule?"

"None other." The old man held out his hand. "Come along now, girl. They're waiting for us."

Catherine drew back.

The old man pursed his lips. "Well, I suppose you could return the way you came. The Willens will be happy to see you."

Flustered, Catherine said, "I don't understand. How can you know. . . ."

"Know your name, your peril? Weren't you listening? You are of Griaule, daughter. And more so than most, for you have slept at the center of his dreams. Your entire life has been prelude to this time, and your destiny will not be known until you come to the place from which his dreams arise . . . the dragon's heart." He took her hand. "My name

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is Amos Mauldry. Captain Amos Mauldry, at your service. I have waited years for you . . . years! I am to prepare you for the consummate moment of your life. I urge you to follow me, to join the company of the Feelys and begin your preparation. But—" he shrugged "—the choice is yours. I will not coerce you more than I have done . . . except to say this. Go with me now, and when you return you will discover that you have nothing to fear of the Willen brothers."

He let loose of her hand and stood gazing at her with calm regard. She would have liked to disregard his words, but they were in such accord with all she had ever felt about her association with the dragon, she found that she could not. "Who," she asked, "are the Feelys?"

He made a disparaging noise. "Harmless creatures. They pass their time in copulating and arguing among themselves over the most trivial of matters. Were they not of service to Griaule, keeping him free of certain pests, they would have no use whatsoever. Still, there are worse folk in the world, and they do have moments in which they shine." He shifted impatiently, tapped his cane on the chamber floor. "You'll meet them soon enough. Are you with me or not?"

Grudgingly, her hook at the ready, Catherine followed Mauldry toward the opening at the rear of the chamber and into a narrow, twisting channel illuminated by a pulsing golden light that issued from within Griaule's flesh. This radiance, Mauldry said, derived from the dragon's blood, which, while it did not flow, was subject to fluctuations in brilliance due to changes in its chemistry. Or so he believed. He had regained his light-hearted manner, and as they walked he told Catherine he had captained a cargo ship that plied between Port Chantay and the Pearl Islands.

"We carried livestock, breadfruit, whale oil," he said. "I can't think of much we didn't carry. It was a good life, but hard as hard gets, and after I retired . . . well, I'd never married, and with time on my hands. I figured I owed myself some high times. I decided I'd see the sights, and the sight I most wanted to see was Griaule. I'd heard he was the First Wonder of the World . . . and he was! I was amazed, flabbergasted. I couldn't get enough of seeing him. He was more than a wonder. A miracle, an absolute majesty of a creature. People warned me to keep clear of the mouth, and they were right. But I couldn't stay away. One evening—I was walking along the edge of the mouth—two scalehunters set upon me, beat and robbed me. Left me for dead. And I would have died if it hadn't been for the Feelys." He clucked his tongue. "I suppose I might as well give you some of their background. It can't help but prepare you for them . . . and I admit they need preparing for. They're not in the least agreeable to the eye." He cocked an eye toward Catherine, and after a dozen steps more he said, "Aren't you going to ask me to proceed."

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"You didn't seem to need encouragement," she said.

He chuckled, nodding his approval. "Quite right, quite right." He walked on in silence, his shoulders hunched and head inclined, like an old turtle who'd learned to get about on two legs.

"Well?" said Catherine, growing annoyed.

"I knew you'd ask," he said, and winked at her. "I didn't know who they were myself at first. If I had known I'd have been terrified. There are about five or six hundred in the colony. Their numbers are kept down by childbirth mortality and various other forms of attrition. They're most of them the descendants of a retarded man named Feely who wandered into the mouth almost a thousand years ago. Apparently he was walking near the mouth when flights of birds and swarms of insects began issuing from it. Not just a few, mind you. Entire populations. Wellsir, Feely was badly frightened. He was sure that some terrible beast had chased all these lesser creatures out, and he tried to hide from it. But he was so confused that instead of running away from the mouth, he ran into it and hid in the bushes. He waited for almost a day . . . no beast. The only sign of danger was a muffled thud from deep within the dragon. Finally his curiosity overcame his fear, and he went into the throat." Mauldry hawked and spat. "He felt secure there. More secure than on the outside, at any rate. Doubtless Griaule's doing, that feeling. He needed the Feelys to be happy so they'd settle down and be his exterminators. Anyway, the first thing Feely did was to bring in a madwoman he'd known in Teocinte, and over the years they recruited other madmen who happened along. I was the first sane person they'd brought into the fold. They're extremely chauvinistic regarding the sane. But of course they were directed by Griaule to take me in. He knew you'd need someone to talk to." He prodded the wall with his cane. "And now this is my home. More than a home. It's my truth, my love. To live here is to be transfigured."

"That's a bit hard to swallow," said Catherine.

"Is it, now? You of all those who dwell on the surface should understand the scope of Griaule's virtues. There's no greater security than that he offers, no greater comprehension than that he bestows."

"You make him sound like a god."

Mauldry stopped walking, looking at her askance. The golden light waxed bright, filling in his wrinkles with shadows, making him appear to be centuries old. "Well, what do you think he is?" he asked with an air of mild indignation. "What else could he be?"

Another ten minutes brought them to a chamber even more fabulous than the last. In shape it was oval, like an egg with a flattened bottom stood on end, an egg some one hundred and fifty feet high and a bit more than half that in diameter. It was lit by the same pulsing golden glow that had illuminated the channel, but here the fluctuations were more

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gradual and more extreme, ranging from a murky dimness to a glare approaching that of full daylight. The upper two thirds of the chamber wall was obscured by stacked ranks of small cubicles, leaning together at rickety angles, a geometry lacking the precision of the cells of a honeycomb, yet reminiscent of such, as if the bees that constructed it had been drunk. The entrances of the cubicles were draped with curtains, and lashed to their sides were ropes, rope ladders, and baskets that functioned as elevators, several of which were in use, lowering and lifting men and women dressed in a style similar to Mauldry: Catherine was reminded of a painting she had seen depicting the roof warrens of Port Chantay; but those habitations, while redolent of poverty and despair, had not as did these evoked an impression of squalid degeneracy, of order lapsed into the perverse. The lower portion of the chamber (and it was in this area that the channel emerged) was covered with a motley carpet composed of bolts of silk and satin and other rich fabrics, and seventy or eighty people were strolling and reclining on the gentle slopes. Only the center had been left clear, and there a gaping hole led away into yet another section of the dragon; a system of pipes ran into the hole, and Mauldry later explained that these carried the wastes of the colony into a pit of acids that had once fueled Griaule's fires. The dome of the chamber was choked with mist, the same pale stuff that had been vented from the protuberances in the previous chamber; birds with black wings and red markings on their heads made wheeling flights in and out of it, and frail scarves of mist drifted throughout. There was a sickly sweet odor to the place, and Catherine heard a murmurous rustling that issued from every quarter.

"Well," said Mauldry, making a sweeping gesture with his cane that included the entire chamber. "What do you think of our little colony?"

Some of the Feelys had noticed them and were edging forward in small groups, stopping, whispering agitatedly among themselves, then edging forward again, all with the hesitant curiosity of savages; and although no signal had been given, the curtains over the cubicle entrances were being thrown back, heads were poking forth, and tiny figures were shinnying down the ropes, crowding into baskets, scuttling downward on the rope ladders, hundreds of people beginning to hurry toward her at a pace that brought to mind the panicked swarming of an anthill. And on first glance they seemed as alike as ants. Thin and pale and stooped, with sloping, nearly hairless skulls, and weepy eyes and thick-lipped slack mouths, like ugly children in their rotted silks and satins. Cl[illegible]r and closer they came, those in front pushed by the swelling ranks [illegible]heir rear, and Catherine, unnerved by their stares, ignoring Mauldry's attempts to soothe her, retreated into the channel. Mauldry turned to the

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Feelys, brandishing his cane as if it were a victor's sword, and cried, "She is here! He has brought her to us at last! She is here!"

His words caused several of those at the front of the press to throw back their heads and loose a whinnying laughter that went higher and higher in pitch as the golden light brightened. Others in the crowd lifted their hands, palms outward, holding them tight to their chests, and made little hops of excitement, and others yet twitched their heads from side to side, cutting their eyes this way and that, their expressions flowing between belligerence and confusion, apparently unsure of what was happening. This exhibition, clearly displaying the Feelys' retardation, the tenuousness of their self-control, dismayed Catherine still more. But Mauldry seemed delighted and continued to exhort them, shouting, "She is here," over and over. His outcry came to rule the Feelys, to orchestrate their movements. They began to sway, to repeat his words, slurring them so that their response was in effect a single word, "Shees'eer, Shees'eer," that reverberated through the chamber, acquiring a rolling echo, a hissing sonority, like the rapid breathing of a giant. The sound washed over Catherine, enfeebling her with its intensity, and she shrank back against the wall of the channel, expecting the Feelys to break ranks and surround her; but they were so absorbed in their chanting, they appeared to have forgotten her. They milled about, bumping into one another, some striking out in anger at those who had impeded their way, others embracing and giggling, engaging in sexual play, but all of them keeping up the chorus of shouts.

Mauldry turned to her, his eyes giving back gleams of the golden light, his face looking in its vacuous glee akin to those of the Feelys, and holding out his hands to her, his tone manifesting the bland sincerity of a priest, he said, "Welcome home."

3

Catherine was housed in two rooms halfway up the chamber wall, an apartment that adjoined Mauldry's quarters and was furnished with a rich carpeting of silks and furs and embroidered pillows; on the walls, also draped in these materials, hung a mirror with a gem-studded frame and two oil paintings—this bounty, said Mauldry, all part of Griaule's horde, the bulk of which lay in a cave west of the valley, its location known only to the Feelys. One of the rooms contained a large basin for bathing, but since water was at a premium—being collected from points at which it seeped in through the scales—she was permitted one bath a week and no more. Still, the apartment and the general living conditions were on a par with those in Hangtown, and had it not been for the

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Feelys, Catherine might have felt at home. But except in the case of the woman Leitha, who served her meals and cleaned, she could not overcome her revulsion at their inbred appearance and demented manner. They seemed to be responding to stimuli that she could not perceive, stopping now and then to cock an ear to an inaudible call or to stare at some invisible disturbance in the air. They scurried up and down the ropes to no apparent purpose, laughing and chattering, and they engaged in mass copulations at the bottom of the chamber. They spoke a mongrel dialect that she could barely understand, and they would hang on ropes outside her apartment, arguing, offering criticism of one another's dress and behavior, picking at the most insignificant of flaws and judging them according to an intricate code whose niceties Catherine was unable to master. They would follow her wherever she went, never sharing the same basket, but descending or ascending alongside her, staring, shrinking away if she turned her gaze upon them. With their foppish rags, their jewels, their childish pettiness and jealousies, they both irritated and frightened her; there was a tremendous tension in the way they looked at her, and she had the idea that at any moment they might lose their awe of her and attack.

She kept to her rooms those first weeks, brooding, trying to invent some means of escape, her solitude broken only by Leitha's ministrations and Mauldry's visits. He came twice daily and would sit among the pillows, declaiming upon Griaule's majesty, his truth. She did not enjoy the visits. The righteous quaver in his voice aroused her loathing, reminding her of the mendicant priests who passed now and then through Hangtown, leaving bastards and empty purses in their wake. She found his conversation for the most part boring, and when it did not bore, she found it disturbing in its constant references to her time of trial at the dragon's heart. She had no doubt that Griaule was at work in her life. The longer she remained in the colony, the more vivid her dreams became and the more certain she grew that his purpose was somehow aligned with her presence there. But the pathetic condition of the Feelys shed a wan light on her old fantasies of a destiny entwined with the dragon's, and she began to see herself in that wan light, to experience a revulsion at her fecklessness equal to that she felt toward those around her.

"You are our salvation," Mauldry told her one day as she sat sewing herself a new pair of trousers—she refused to dress in the gilt and satin rags preferred by the Feelys. "Only you can know the mystery of the dragon's heart, only you can inform us of his deepest wish for us. We've known this for years."

Seated amid the barbaric disorder of silks and furs, Catherine looked out through a gap in the curtains, watching the waning of the golden light. "You hold me prisoner," she said. "Why should I help you?"

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"Would you leave us, then?" Mauldry asked. "What of the Willens?"

"I doubt they're still waiting for me. Even if they are, it's only a matter of which death I prefer, a lingering one here or a swift one at their hands."

Mauldry fingered the gold knob of his cane. "You're right," he said. "The Willens are no longer a menace."

She glanced up at him.

"They died the moment you went down out of Griaule's mouth," he said. "He sent his creatures to deal with them, knowing you were his at long last."

Catherine remembered the shouts she'd heard while walking down the incline of the throat. "What creatures?"

"That's of no importance," said Mauldry. "What is important is that you apprehend the subtlety of his power, his absolute mastery and control over your thoughts, your being."

"Why?" she asked. "Why is that important?" He seemed to be struggling to explain himself, and she laughed. "Lost touch with your god, Mauldry? Won't he supply the appropriate cant?"

Mauldry composed himself. "It is for you, not I, to understand why you are here. You must explore Griaule, study the miraculous workings of his flesh, involve yourself in the intricate order of his being."

In frustration, Catherine punched at a pillow. "If you don't let me go, I'll die! This place will kill me. I won't be around long enough to do any exploring."

"Oh, but you will." Mauldry favored her with an unctuous smile. "That, too, is known to us."

Ropes creaked, and a moment later the curtains parted, and Leitha, a young woman in a gown of watered blue taffeta, whose bodice pushed up the pale nubs of her breasts, entered bearing Catherine's dinner tray. She set down the tray. "Be mo', ma'am?" she said. "Or mus' I later c'meah." She gazed fixedly at Catherine, her close-set brown eyes blinking, fingers plucking at the folds of her gown.

"Whatever you want." Catherine said.

Leitha continued to stare at her, and only when Mauldry spoke sharply to her did she turn and leave.

Catherine looked down disconsolately at the tray and noticed that in addition to the usual fare of greens and fruit (gathered from the dragon's mouth) there were several slices of underdone meat, whose reddish hue appeared identical to the color of Griaule's flesh. "What's this?" she asked, poking at one of the slices.

"The hunters were successful today," said Mauldry. "Every so often hunting parties are sent into the digestive tract. It's quite dangerous, but there are beasts there that can injure Griaule. It serves him that we

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hunt them, and their flesh nourishes us." He leaned forward, studying her face. "Another party is going out tomorrow. Perhaps you'd care to join them. I can arrange it if you wish. You'll be well protected."

Catherine's initial impulse was to reject the invitation, but then she thought that this might offer an opportunity for escape; in fact, she realized that to play upon Mauldry's tendencies, to evince interest in a study of the dragon, would be a wise move. The more she learned about Griaule's geography, the greater chance there would be that she would find a way out.

"You said it was dangerous. . . . How dangerous?"

"For you? Not in the least. Griaule would not harm you. But for the hunting party, well . . . lives will be lost."

"And they're going out tomorrow?"

"Perhaps the next day as well. We're not sure how extensive an infestation is involved."

"What kind of beast are you talking about?"

"Serpents of a sort."

Catherine's enthusiasm was dimmed, but she saw no other means of taking action. "Very well. I'll go with them tomorrow."

"Wonderful, wonderful!" It took Mauldry three tries to heave himself up from the cushion, and when at last he managed to stand, he leaned on his cane, breathing heavily. "I'll come for you early in the morning."

"You're going, too? You don't seem up to the exertion."

Mauldry chuckled. "It's true, I'm an old man. But where you're concerned, daughter, my energies are inexhaustible." He performed a gallant bow and hobbled from the room.

Not long after he had left, Leitha returned. She drew a second curtain across the entrance, cutting the light, even at its most brilliant, to a dim effusion. Then she stood by the entrance, eyes fixed on Catherine. "Wan' mo' fum Leitha?" she asked.

The question was not a formality. Leitha had made it plain by touches and other signs that Catherine had but to ask and she would come to her as a lover. Her deformities masked by the shadowy air, she had the look of a pretty young girl dressed for a dance, and for a moment, in the grip of loneliness and despair, watching Leitha alternately brightening and merging with gloom, listening to the unceasing murmur of the Feelys from without, aware in full of the tribal strangeness of the colony and her utter lack of connection, Catherine felt a bizarre arousal. But the moment passed, and she was disgusted with herself, with her weakness, and angry at Leitha and this degenerate place that was eroding her humanity. "Get out," she said coldly, and when Leitha hesitated, she shouted the command, sending the girl stumbling backwards from the room. Then she turned onto her stomach, her face pressed into a pillow,

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expecting to cry, feeling the pressure of a sob building in her chest; but the sob never manifested, and she lay there, knowing her emptiness, feeling that she was no longer worthy of even her own tears.

Behind one of the cubicles in the lower half of the chamber was hidden the entrance to a wide circular passage ringed by ribs of cartilage, and it was along this passage the next morning that Catherine and Mauldry, accompanied by thirty male Feelys, set out upon the hunt. They were armed with swords and bore torches to light the way, for here Griaule's veins were too deeply embedded to provide illumination; they walked in a silence broken only by coughs and the soft scraping of their footsteps. The silence, such a contrast from the Feelys' usual chatter, unsettled Catherine, and the flaring and guttering of the torches, the apparition of a backlit pale face turned toward her, the tingling acidic scent that grew stronger and stronger, all this assisted her impression that they were lost souls treading some byway in Hell.

Their angle of descent increased, and shortly thereafter they reached a spot from which Catherine had a view of a black distance shot through with intricate networks of fine golden skeins, like spiderwebs of gold in a night sky. Mauldry told her to wait, and the torches of the hunting party moved off, making it clear that they had come to a large chamber; but she did not understand just how large until a fire suddenly bloomed, bursting into towering flames: an enormous bonfire composed of sapling trunks and entire bushes. The size of the fire was impressive in itself, but the immense cavity of the stomach that it partially revealed was more impressive yet. It could not have been less than two hundred yards long, and was walled with folds of thin whitish skin figured by lacings and branchings of veins, attached to curving ribs covered with even thinner skin that showed their every articulation. A quarter of the way across the cavity, the floor declined into a sink brimming with a dark liquid, and it was along a section of the wall close to the sink that the bonfire had been lit, its smoke billowing up toward a bruised patch of skin some fifty feet in circumference with a tattered rip at the center. As Catherine watched the entire patch began to undulate. The hunting party gathered beneath it, ranged around the bonfire, their swords raised. Then, with ponderous slowness a length of thick white tubing was extruded from the rip, a gigantic worm that lifted its blind head above the hunting party, opened a mouth fringed with palps to expose a dark red maw and emitted a piercing squeal that touched off echoes and made Catherine put her hands to her ears. More and more of the worm's body emerged from the stomach wall, and she marveled at the courage of the hunting party, who maintained their ground. The worm's squealing became unbearably loud as smoke enveloped it; it lashed about, twisting

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and probing at the air with its head, and then, with an even louder cry, it fell across the bonfire, writhing, sending up showers of sparks. It rolled out of the fire, crushing several of the party; the others set to with their swords, hacking in a frenzy at the head, painting streaks of dark blood over the corpse-pale skin. Catherine realized that she had pressed her fists to her cheeks and was screaming, so involved was she in the battle. The worm's blood spattered the floor of the cavity, its skin was charred and blistered from the flames, and its head was horribly slashed, the flesh hanging in ragged strips. But it continued to squeal, humping up great sections of its body, forming an arch over groups of attackers and dropping down upon them. A third of the hunting party lay motionless, their limbs sprawled in graceless attitudes, the remnants of the bonfire—heaps of burning branches—scattered among them; the rest stabbed and sliced at the increasingly torpid worm, dancing away from its lunges. At last the worm lifted half its body off the floor, its head held high, silent for a moment, swaying with the languor of a mesmerized serpent. It let out a cry like the whistle of a monstrous tea kettle, a cry that seemed to fill the cavity with its fierce vibrations, and fell, twisting once and growing still, its maw half-open, palps twitching in the register of some final internal function.

The hunting party collapsed around it, winded, drained, some leaning on their swords. Shocked by the suddenness of the silence, Catherine went a few steps out into the cavity, Mauldry at her shoulder. She hesitated, then moved forward again, thinking that some of the party might need tending. But those who had fallen were dead, their limbs broken, blood showing on their mouths. She walked alongside the worm. The thickness of its body was three times her height, the skin glistening and warped by countless tiny puckers and tinged with a faint bluish cast that made it all the more ghastly.

"What are you thinking?" Mauldry asked.

Catherine shook her head. No thoughts would come to her. It was if the process of thought itself had been canceled by the enormity of what she had witnessed. She had always supposed that she had a fair idea of Griaule's scope, his complexity, but now she understood that whatever she had once believed had been inadequate, and she struggled to acclimate to this new perspective. There was a commotion behind her. Members of the hunting party were hacking slabs of meat from the worm. Mauldry draped an arm about her, and by that contact she became aware that she was trembling.

"Come along," he said. "I'll take you home."

"To my room, you mean?" Her bitterness resurfaced, and she threw off his arm.

"Perhaps you'll never think of it as home," he said. "Yet nowhere is

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there a place more suited to you." He signaled to one of the hunting party, who came toward them, stopped to light a dead torch from a pile of burning branches.

With a dismal laugh, Catherine said, "I'm beginning to find it irksome how you claim to know so much about me."

"It's not you I claim to know," he said, "though it has been given me to understand something of your purpose. But—" he rapped the tip of his cane against the floor of the cavity "—he by whom you are most known, *him* I know well."

4

Catherine made three escape attempts during the next two months, and thereafter gave up on the enterprise; with hundreds of eyes watching her, there was no point in wasting energy. For almost six months following the final attempt she became dispirited and refused to leave her rooms. Her health suffered, her thoughts paled, and she lay abed for hours, reliving her life in Hangtown, which she came to view as a model of joy and contentment. Her inactivity caused loneliness to bear in upon her. Mauldry tried his best to entertain her, but his mystical obsession with Griaule made him incapable of offering the consolation of a true friend. And so, without friends or lovers, without even an enemy, she sank into a welter of self-pity and began to toy with the idea of suicide. The prospect of never seeing the sun again, of attending no more carnivals at Teocinte . . . it seemed too much to endure. But either she was not brave enough or not sufficiently foolish to take her own life, and deciding that no matter how vile or delimiting the circumstance, it promised more than eternal darkness, she gave herself to the one occupation the Feelys would permit her: the exploration and study of Griaule.

Like one of those enormous Tibetan sculptures of the Buddha constructed within a tower only a trifle larger than the sculpture itself, Griaule's unbeating heart was a dimpled golden shape as vast as a cathedral and was enclosed within a chamber whose walls left a gap six feet wide around the organ. The chamber could be reached by passing through a vein that had ruptured long ago and was now a wrinkled brown tube just big enough for Catherine to crawl along it; to make this transit and then emerge into that narrow space beside the heart was an intensely claustrophobic experience, and it took her a long, long while to get used to the process. Even after she had grown accustomed to this, it was still difficult for her to adjust to the peculiar climate at the heart. The air was thick with a heated stinging scent that reminded her of the brimstone stink left by a lightning stroke, and there was an atmosphere

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of imminence, a stillness and tension redolent of some cthonic disturbance that might strike at any moment. The blood at the heart did not merely fluctuate (and here the fluctuations were erratic, varying both in range of brilliance and rapidity of change); it circulated—the movement due to variations in heat and pressure—through a series of convulsed inner chambers, and this eddying in conjunction with the flickering brilliance threw patterns of light and shadow on the heart wall, patterns as complex and fanciful as arabesques that drew her eye in. Staring at them, Catherine began to be able to predict what configurations would next appear and to apprehend a logic to their progression; it was nothing that she could put into words, but watching the play of light and shadow produced in her emotional responses that seemed keyed to the shifting patterns and allowed her to make crude guesses as to the heart's workings. She learned that if she stared too long at the patterns, dreams would take her, dreams notable for their vividness, and one particularly notable in that it recurred again and again.

The dream began with a sunrise, the solar disc edging up from the southern horizon, its rays spearing toward a coast strewn with great black rocks that protruded from the shallows, and perched upon them were sleeping dragons; as the sun warmed them, light flaring on their scales, they grumbled and lifted their heads and with the snapping sound of huge sails filling with wind, they unfolded their leathery wings and went soaring up into an indigo sky flecked with stars arranged into strange constellations, wheeling and roaring their exultation . . . all but one dragon, who flew only a brief arc before coming disjointed in midflight and dropping like a stone into the water, vanishing beneath the waves. It was an awesome thing to see, this tumbling flight, the wings billowing, tearing, the fanged mouth open, claws grasping for purchase in the air. But despite its beauty, the dream seemed to have little relevance to Griaule's situation. He was in no danger of falling, that much was certain. Nevertheless, the frequency of the dream's recurrence persuaded Catherine that something must be amiss, that perhaps Griaule feared an attack of the sort that had stricken the flying dragon. With this in mind she began to inspect the heart, using her hooks to clamber up the steep slopes of the chamber walls, sometimes hanging upside down like a blond spider above the glowing, flickering organ. But she could find nothing out of order, no imperfections—at least as far as she could determine—and the sole result of the inspection was that the dream stopped occurring and was replaced by a simpler dream in which she watched the chest of a sleeping dragon contract and expand. She could make no sense of it, and although the dream continued to recur, she paid less and less attention to it.

Mauldry, who had been expecting miraculous insights from her, was

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depressed when none were forthcoming. "Perhaps I've been wrong all these years," he said. "Or senile. Perhaps I'm growing senile."

A few months earlier, Catherine, locked into bitterness and resentment, might have seconded his opinion out of spite; but her studies at the heart had soothed her, infused her both with calm resignation and some compassion for her jailers—they could not, after all, be blamed for their pitiful condition—and she said to Mauldry, "I've only begun to learn. It's likely to take a long time before I understand what he wants. And that's in keeping with his nature, isn't it? That nothing happens quickly?"

"I suppose you're right," he said glumly.

"Of course I am," she said. "Sooner or later there'll be a revelation. But a creature like Griaule doesn't yield his secrets to a casual glance. Just give me time."

And oddly enough, though she had spoken these words to cheer Mauldry, they seemed to ring true.

She had started her explorations with minimal enthusiasm, but Griaule's scope was so extensive, his populations of parasites and symbiotes so exotic and intriguing, her passion for knowledge was fired and over the next six years she grew zealous in her studies, using them to compensate for the emptiness of her life. With Mauldry ever at her side, accompanied by small groups of the Feelys, she mapped the interior of the dragon, stopping short of penetrating the skull, warned off from that region by a premonition of danger. She sent several of the more intelligent Feelys into Teocinte, where they acquired beakers and flasks and books and writing materials that enabled her to build a primitive laboratory for chemical analysis. She discovered that the egg-shaped chamber occupied by the colony would—had the dragon been fully alive—be pumped full of acids and gasses by the contraction of the heart muscle, flooding the channel, mingling in the adjoining chamber with yet another liquid, forming a volatile mixture that Griaule's breath would—if he so desired—kindle into flame; if he did not so desire, the expansion of the heart would empty the chamber. She distilled from these liquids and from that she derived a potent narcotic that she named brianine after her nemesis, and from a lichen growing on the outer surface of the lungs, she derived a powerful stimulant. She catalogued the dragon's myriad flora and fauna, covering the walls of her rooms with lists and charts and notations on their behaviors. Many of the animals were either familiar to her or variants of familiar forms. Spiders, bats, swallows, and the like. But as was the case on the dragon's surface, a few of them testified to his otherworldly origins, and perhaps the most curious of them was Catherine's metahex (her designation for it), a creature with six identical bodies that thrived in the stomach acids. Each body was

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approximately the size and color of a worn penny, fractionally more dense than a jellyfish, ringed with cilia, and all were in a constant state of agitation. She had at first assumed the metahex to be six creatures, a species that traveled in sixes, but had begun to suspect otherwise when—upon killing one for the purposes of dissection—the other five bodies had also died. She had initiated a series of experiments that involved menacing and killing hundreds of the things, and had ascertained that the bodies were connected by some sort of field—one whose presence she deduced by process of observation—that permitted the essence of the creature to switch back and forth between the bodies, utilizing the ones it did not occupy as a unique form of camouflage. But even the metahex seemed ordinary when compared to the ghostvine, a plant that she discovered grew in one place alone, a small cavity near the base of the skull.

None of the colony would approach that region, warned away by the same sense of danger that had afflicted Catherine, and it was presumed that should one venture too close to the brain, Griaule would mobilize some of his more deadly inhabitants to deal with the interloper. But Catherine felt secure in approaching the cavity, and leaving Mauldry and her escort of Feelys behind, she climbed the steep channel that led up to it, lighting her way with a torch, and entered through an aperture not much wider than her hips. Once inside, seeing that the place was lit by veins of golden blood that branched across the ceiling, flickering like the blown flame of a candle, she extinguished the torch; she noticed with surprise that except for the ceiling, the entire cavity—a boxy space some twenty feet long, about eight feet in height—was fettered with vines whose leaves were dark green, glossy, with complex veination and tips that ended in minuscule hollow tubes. She was winded from the climb, more winded—she thought—than she should have been, and she sat down against the wall to catch her breath; then, feeling drowsy, she closed her eyes for a moment's rest. She came alert to the sound of Mauldry's voice shouting her name. Still drowsy, annoyed by his impatience, she called out, "I just want to rest a few minutes!"

"A few minutes?" he cried. "You've been there three days! What's going on? Are you all right?"

"That's ridiculous!" She started to come to her feet, then sat back, stunned by the sight of a naked woman with long blond hair curled up in a corner not ten feet away, nestled so close to the cavity wall that the tips of leaves half-covered her body and obscured her face.

"Catherine!" Mauldry shouted. "Answer me!"

"I . . . I'm all right! Just a minute!"

The woman stirred and made a complaining noise.

"Catherine!"

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"I said I'm all right!"

The woman stretched out her legs; on her right hip was a fine pink scar, hook-shaped, identical to the scar on Catherine's hip, evidence of a childhood fall. And on the back of the right knee, a patch of raw, puckered skin, the product of an acid burn she'd suffered the year before. She was astonished by the sight of these markings, but when the woman sat up and Catherine understood that she was staring at her twin—identical not only in feature, but also in expression, wearing a resigned look that she had glimpsed many times in her mirror—her astonishment turned to fright. She could have sworn she felt the muscles of the woman's face shifting as the expression changed into one of pleased recognition, and in spite of her fear, she had a vague sense of the woman's emotions, of her burgeoning hope and elation.

"Sister," said the woman; she glanced down at her body, and Catherine had a momentary flash of doubled vision, watching the woman's head decline and seeing as well naked breasts and belly from the perspective of the woman's eyes. Her vision returned to normal, and she looked at the woman's face . . . *her* face. Though she had studied herself in the mirror each morning for years, she had never had such a clear perception of the changes that life inside the dragon had wrought upon her. Fine lines bracketed her lips, and the beginnings of crows' feet radiated from the corners of her eyes. Her cheeks had hollowed, and this made her cheekbones appear sharper; the set of her mouth seemed harder, more determined. The high gloss and perfection of her youthful beauty had been marred far more than she had thought, and this dismayed her. However, the most remarkable change—the one that most struck her—was not embodied by any one detail but in the overall character of the face, in that it exhibited character, for—she realized—prior to entering the dragon it had displayed very little, and what little it *had* displayed had been evidence of indulgence. It troubled her to have this knowledge of the fool she had been thrust upon her with such poignancy.

As if the woman had been listening to her thoughts, she held out her hand and said, "Don't punish yourself, sister. We are all victims of our past."

"What are you?" Catherine asked, pulling back. She felt the woman was a danger to her, though she was not sure why.

"I am you." Again the woman reached out to touch her, and again Catherine shifted away. The woman's face was smiling, but Catherine felt the wash of her frustration and noticed that the woman had leaned forward only a few degrees, remaining in contact with the leaves of the vines as if there were some attachment between them that she could not break.

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"I doubt that." Catherine was fascinated, but she was beginning to be swayed by the intuition that the woman's touch would harm her.

"But I am!" the woman insisted. "And something more, besides."

"What more?"

"The plant extracts essences," said the woman. "Infinitely small constructs of the flesh from which it creates a likeness free of the imperfections of your body. And since the seeds of your future are embodied by these essences, thouugh they are unknown to you, I know them . . . for now."

"For now?"

The woman's tone had become desperate. "There's a connection between us . . . surely you feel it?"

"Yes."

"To live, to complete that connection, I must touch you. And once I do, this knowledge of the future will be lost to me. I will be as you . . . though separate. But don't worry. I won't interfere with you, I'll live my own life." She leaned forward again, and Catherine saw that some of the leaves were affixed to her back, the hollow tubes at their tips adhering to the skin. Once again she had an awareness of danger, a growing apprehension that the woman's touch would drain her of some vital substance.

"If you know my future," she said, "then tell me . . . will I ever escape Griaule."

Mauldry chose this moment to call out to her, and she soothed him by saying that she was taking some cuttings, that she would be down soon. She repeated her question, and the woman said, "Yes, yes, you will leave the dragon," and tried to grasp her hand. "Don't be afraid. I won't harm you."

The woman's flesh was sagging, and Catherine felt the eddying of her fear.

"Please!" she said, holding out both hands. "Only your touch will sustain me. Without it, I'll die!"

But Catherine refused to trust her.

"You must believe me!" cried the woman. "I am your sister! My blood is yours, my memories!" The flesh upon her arms had sagged into billows like the flesh of an old woman, and her face was becoming jowly, grossly distorted. "Oh, please! Remember the time with Stel below the wing . . . you were a maiden. The wind was blowing thistles down from Griaule's back like a rain of silver. And remember the gala in Teocinte? Your sixteenth birthday. You wore a mask of orange blossoms and gold wire, and three men asked for your hand. For God's sake, Catherine! Listen to me! The major . . . don't you remember him? The young major? You were in love with him, but you didn't follow your heart. You were afraid of love, you

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didn't trust what you felt because you never trusted yourself in those days."

The connection between them was fading, and Catherine steeled herself against the woman's entreaties, which had begun to move her more than a little bit. The woman slumped down, her features blurring, a horrid sight, like the melting of a wax figure, and then, an even more horrid sight, she smiled, her lips appearing to dissolve away from teeth that were themselves dissolving.

"I understand," said the woman in a frail voice, and gave a husky, glutinous laugh. "Now I see."

"What is it?" Catherine asked. But the woman collapsed, rolling onto her side, and the process of deterioration grew more rapid; within the span of a few minutes she had dissipated into a gelatinous grayish white puddle that retained the rough outline of her form. Catherine was both appalled and relieved; however, she couldn't help feeling some remorse, uncertain whether she had acted in self-defense or through cowardice had damned a creature who was by nature no more reprehensible than herself. While the woman had been alive—if that was the proper word—Catherine had been mostly afraid, but now she marveled at the apparition, at the complexity of a plant that could produce even the semblance of a human. And the woman had been, she thought, something more vital than mere likeness. How else could she have known her memories? Or could memory, she wondered, have a physiological basis? She forced herself to take samples of the woman's remains, of the vines, with an eye toward exploring the mystery. But she doubted that the heart of such an intricate mystery would be accessible to her primitive instruments. This was to prove a self-fulfilling prophecy, because she really did not want to know the secrets of the ghostvine, leery as to what might be brought to light concerning her own nature, and with the passage of time, although she thought of it often and sometimes discussed the phenomenon with Mauldry, she eventually let the matter drop.

5

Though the temperature never changed, though neither rain nor snow fell, though the fluctuations of the golden light remained consistent in their rhythms, the seasons were registered inside the dragon by migrations of birds, the weaving of cocoons, the birth of millions of insects at once; and it was by these signs that Catherine—nine years after entering Griaule's mouth—knew it to be autumn when she fell in love. The three years prior to this had been characterized by a slackening of her zeal, a gradual wearing down of her enthusiasm for scientific knowledge, and

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this tendency became marked after the death of Captain Mauldry from natural causes; without him to serve as a buffer between her and the Feelys, she was overwhelmed by their inanity, their woeful aspect. In truth, there was not much left to learn. Her maps were complete, her specimens and notes filled several rooms, and while she continued her visits to the dragon's heart, she no longer sought to interpret the dreams, using them instead to pass the boring hours. Again she grew restless and began to consider escape. Her life was being wasted, she believed, and she wanted to return to the world, to engage more vital opportunities than those available to her in Griaule's many-chambered prison. It was not that she was ungrateful for the experience. Had she managed to escape shortly after her arrival, she would have returned to a life of meaningless frivolity; but now, armed with knowledge, aware of her strengths and weaknesses, possessed of ambition and a heightened sense of morality, she thought she would be able to accomplish something of importance. But before she could determine whether or not escape was possible, there was a new arrival at the colony, a man whom a group of Feelys—while gathering berries near the mouth—had found lying unconscious and had borne to safety. The man's name was John Colmacos, and he was in his early thirties, a botanist from the university at Port Chantay who had been abandoned by his guides when he insisted on entering the mouth and had subsequently been mauled by apes that had taken up residence in the mouth. He was lean, rawboned, with powerful, thick-fingered hands and fine brown hair that would never stay combed. His long-jawed, horsey face struck a bargain between homely and distinctive, and was stamped with a perpetually inquiring expression, as if he were a bit perplexed by everything he saw. His blue eyes were large and intricate, the irises flecked with green and hazel, appearing surprisingly delicate in contrast to the rest of him.

Catherine, happy to have rational company, especially that of a professional in her vocation, took charge of nursing him back to health—he had suffered fractures of the arm and ankle, and was badly cut about the face; and in the course of this she began to have fantasies about him as a lover. She had never met a man with his gentleness of manner, his lack of pretense, and she found it most surprising that he wasn't concerned with trying to impress her. Her conception of men had been limited to the soldiers of Teocinte, the thugs of Hangtown, and everything about John fascinated her. For a while she tried to deny her feelings, telling herself that she would have fallen in love with almost anyone under the circumstances, afraid that by loving she would only increase her dissatisfaction with her prison; and, too, there was the realization that this was doubtless another of Griaule's manipulations, his attempt to make her content with her lot, to replace Mauldry with a lover. But she couldn't

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deny that under any circumstance she would have been attracted to John Colmacos for many reasons, not the least of which was his respect for her work with Griaule, for how she had handled adversity. Nor could she deny that the attraction was mutual. That was clear. Although there were awkward moments, there was no mooniness between them; they were both watching what was happening.

"This is amazing," he said one day while going through one of her notebooks, lying on a pile of furs in her apartment. "It's hard to believe you haven't had training."

A flush spread over her cheeks. "Anyone in my shoes, with all that time, nothing else to do, they would have done no less."

He set down the notebook and measured her with a stare that caused her to lower her eyes. "You're wrong," he said. "Most people would have fallen apart. I can't think of anybody else who could have managed all this. You're remarkable."

She felt oddly incompetent in the light of this judgment, as if she had accorded him ultimate authority and were receiving the sort of praise that a wise adult might bestow upon an inept child who had done well for once. She wanted to explain to him that everything she had done had been a kind of therapy, a hobby to stave off despair; but she didn't know how to put this into words without sounding awkward and falsely modest, and so she merely said, "Oh," and busied herself with preparing a dose of brianine to take away the pain in his ankle.

"You're embarrassed," he said. "I'm sorry . . . I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable."

"I'm not . . . I mean, I. . . ." She laughed. "I'm still not accustomed to talking."

He said nothing, smiling.

"What is it?" she said, defensive, feeling that he was making fun of her.

"What do you mean?"

"Why are you smiling?"

"I could frown," he said, "if that would make you comfortable."

Irritated, she bent to her task, mixing paste in a brass goblet studded with uncut emeralds, then molding it into a pellet.

"That was a joke," he said.

"I know."

"What's the matter?"

She shook her head. "Nothing."

"Look," he said. "I don't want to make you uncomfortable . . . I really don't. What am I doing wrong?"

She sighed, exasperated with herself. "It's not you," she said. "I just can't get used to you being here, that's all."

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From without came the babble of some Feelys lowering on ropes toward the chamber floor.

"I can understand that," he said. "I. . . ." He broke off, looked down and fingered the edge of the notebook.

"What were you going to say?"

He threw back his head, laughed. "Do you see how we're acting? Explaining ourselves constantly . . . as if we could hurt each other by saying the wrong word."

She glanced over at him, met his eyes, then looked away.

"What I meant was, we're not that fragile," he said, and then, as if by way of clarification, he hastened to add: "We're not that . . . vulnerable to one another."

He held her stare for a moment, and this time it was he who looked away and Catherine who smiled.

If she hadn't known she was in love, she would have suspected as much from the change in her attitude toward the dragon. She seemed to be seeing everything anew. Her wonder at Griaule's size and strangeness had been restored, and she delighted in displaying his marvelous features to John—the orioles and swallows that never once had flown under the sun, the glowing heart, the cavity where the ghostvine grew (though she would not linger there), and a tiny chamber close to the heart lit not by Griaule's blood but by thousands of luminous white spiders that shifted and crept across the blackness of the ceiling, like a night sky whose constellations had come to life. It was in this chamber that they engaged in their first intimacy, a kiss from which Catherine—after initially letting herself be swept away—pulled back, disoriented by the powerful sensations flooding her body, sensations both familiar and unnatural in that she hadn't experienced them for so long, and startled by the suddenness with which her fantasies had become real. Flustered, she ran from the chamber, leaving John, who was still hobbled by his injuries, to limp back to the colony alone.

She hid from him most of that day sitting with her knees drawn up on a patch of peach-colored silk near the hole at the center of the colony's floor, immersed in the bustle and gabble of the Feelys as they promenaded in their decaying finery. Though for the most part they were absorbed in their own pursuits, some sensed her mood and gathered around her, touching her, making the whimpering noises that among them passed for expressions of tenderness. Their pasty doglike faces ringed her, uniformly sad, and as if sadness were contagious, she started to cry. At first her tears seemed the product of her inability to cope with love, and then it seemed she was crying over the poor thing of her life, the haplessness of her days inside the body of the dragon; but she came to feel that her sadness was one with Griaule's, that this feeling of gloom and entrapment

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reflected his essential mood, and that thought stopped her tears. She'd never considered the dragon an object deserving of sympathy, and she did not now consider him such; but perceiving him imprisoned in a web of ancient magic, and the Chinese puzzle of lesser magics and imprisonments that derived from that original event, she felt foolish for having cried. Everything, she realized, even the happiest of occurrences, might be a cause for tears if you failed to see it in terms of the world that you inhabited; however, if you managed to achieve a balanced perspective, you saw that although sadness could result from every human action, you had to seize the opportunities for effective action which came your way and not question them, no matter how unrealistic or futile they might appear. Just as Griaule had done by finding a way to utilize his power while immobilized. She laughed to think of herself emulating Griaule even in this abstract fashion, and several of the Feelys standing beside her echoed her laughter. One of the males, an old man with tufts of gray hair poking up from his pallid skull, shuffled near, picking at a loose button on his stiff, begrimed coat of silver-embroidered satin.

"Cat'rine mus' be easy sweetly, now?" he said. "No mo' bad t'ing?"

"No," she said. "No more bad thing."

On the other side of the hole a pile of naked Feelys were writhing together in the clumsiness of foreplay, men trying to penetrate men, getting angry, slapping one another, then lapsing into giggles when they found a woman and figured out the proper procedure. Once this would have disgusted her, but no more. Judged by the attitudes of a place not their own, perhaps the Feelys were disgusting; but this *was* their place, and Catherine's place as well, and accepting that at last, she stood and walked toward the nearest basket. The old man hustled after her, fingering his lapels in a parody of self-importance, and, as if he were the functionary of her mood, he announced to everyone they encountered, "No mo' bad t'ing, no mo' bad t'ing."

Riding up in the basket was like passing in front of a hundred tiny stages upon which scenes from the same play were being performed—pale figures slumped on silks, playing with gold and bejeweled baubles—and gazing around her, ignoring the stink, the dilapidation, she felt she was looking out upon an exotic kingdom. Always before she had been impressed by its size and grotesqueness; but now she was struck by its richness, and she wondered whether the Feelys' style of dress was inadvertent or if Griaule's subtlety extended to the point of clothing this human refuse in the rags of dead courtiers and kings. She felt exhilarated, joyful; but as the basket lurched near the level on which her rooms were located, she became nervous. It had been so long since she had been with a man, and she was worried that she might not be suited to him . . . then

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she recalled that she'd been prone to these worries even in the days when she had been with a new man every week.

She lashed the basket to a peg, stepped out onto the walkway outside her rooms, took a deep breath and pushed through the curtains, pulled them shut behind her. John was asleep, the furs pulled up to his chest. In the fading half-light, his face—dirtied by a few days' growth of beard—looked sweetly mysterious and rapt, like the face of a saint at meditation, and she thought it might be best to let him sleep; but that, she realized, was a signal of her nervousness, not of compassion. The only thing to do was to get it over with, to pass through nervousness as quickly as possible and learn what there was to learn. She stripped off her trousers, her shirt, and stood for a second above him, feeling giddy, frail, as if she'd stripped off much more than a few ounces of fabric. Then she eased in beneath the furs, pressing the length of her body to his. He stirred but didn't wake, and this delighted her; she liked the idea of having him in her clutches, of coming to him in the middle of a dream, and she shivered with the apprehension of gleeful, childish power. He tossed, turned onto his side to face her, still asleep, and she pressed closer, marveling at how ready she was, how open to him. He muttered something, and as she nestled against him, he grew hard, his erection pinned between their bellies. Cautiously, she lifted her right knee atop his hip, guided him between her legs and moved her hips back and forth, rubbing against him, slowly, slowly, teasing herself with little bursts of pleasure. His eyelids twitched, blinked open, and he stared at her, his eyes looking black and wet, his skin stained a murky gold in the dimness. "Catherine," he said, and she gave a soft laugh, because her name seemed a power the way he had spoken it. His fingers hooked into the plump meat of her hips as he pushed and prodded at her, trying to find the right angle. Her head fell back, her eyes closed, concentrating on the feeling that centered her dizziness and heat, and then he was inside her, going deep with a single thrust, beginning to make love to her, and she said, "Wait, wait," holding him immobile, afraid for an instant, feeling too much, a black wave of sensation building, threatening to wash her away.

"What's wrong?" he whispered. "Do you want . . ."

"Just wait . . . just for a bit." She rested her forehead against his, trembling, amazed by the difference that he made in her body; one moment she felt buoyant, as if their connection had freed her from the restraints of gravity, and the next moment—whenever he shifted or eased fractionally deeper—she would feel as if all his weight were pouring inside her and she was sinking into the cool silks.

"Are you all right?"

"Mmm." She opened her eyes, saw his face inches away and was surprised that he didn't appear unfamiliar.

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"What is it?" he asked.

"I was just thinking."

"About what?"

"I was wondering who you were, and when I looked at you, it was as if I already knew." She traced the line of his upper lip with her forefinger. "Who are you?"

"I thought you knew already."

"Maybe . . . but I don't know anything specific. Just that you were a professor."

"You want to know specifics?"

"Yes."

"I was an unruly child," he said. "I refused to eat onion soup, I never washed behind my ears."

His grasp tightened on her hips, and he thrust inside her, a few slow, delicious movements, kissing her mouth, her eyes.

"When I was a boy," he said, quickening his rhythm, breathing hard between the words, "I'd go swimming every morning. Off the rocks at Ayler's Point . . . it was beautiful. Cerulean water, palms. Chickens and pigs foraging. On the beach."

"Oh, God!" she said, locking her leg behind his thigh, her eyelids fluttering down.

"My first girlfriend was named Penny . . . she was twelve. Redheaded. I was a year younger. I loved her because she had freckles. I used to believe . . . freckles were . . . a sign of something. I wasn't sure what. But I love you more than her."

"I love you!" She found his rhythm, adapted to it, trying to take him all inside her. She wanted to see where they joined, and she imagined there was no longer any distinction between them, that their bodies had merged and were sealed together.

"I cheated in mathematics class, I could never do trigonometry. God . . . Catherine."

His voice receded, stopped, and the air seemed to grow solid around her, holding her in a rosy suspension. Light was gathering about them, frictive light from a strange heatless burning, and she heard herself crying out, calling his name, saying sweet things, childish things, telling him how wonderful he was, words like the words in a dream, important for their music, their sonority, rather than for any sense they made. She felt again the building of a dark wave in her belly. This time she flowed with it and let it carry her far.

"Love's stupid," John said to her one day months later as they were sitting in the chamber of the heart, watching the complex eddying of golden light and whorls of shadow on the surface of the organ. "I feel

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like a damn sophomore. I keep finding myself thinking that I should do something noble. Feed the hungry, cure a disease." He made a noise of disgust. "It's as if I just woke up to the fact that the world has problems, and because I'm so happily in love, I want everyone else to be happy. But stuck. . . ."

"Sometimes I feel like that myself," she said, startled by this outburst. "Maybe it's stupid, but it's not wrong. And neither is being happy."

"Stuck in here," he went on, "there's no chance of doing anything for ourselves, let alone saving the world. As for being happy, that's not going to last . . . not in here, anyway."

"It's lasted six months," she said. "And if it won't last here, why should it last anywhere?"

He drew up his knees, rubbed the spot on his ankle where it had been fractured.

"What's the matter with you? When I got here, all you could talk about was how much you wanted to escape. You said you'd do anything to get out. It sounds now that you don't care one way or the other."

She watched him rubbing the ankle, knowing what was coming. "I'd like very much to escape. Now that you're here, it's more acceptable to me. I can't deny that. That doesn't mean I wouldn't leave if I had the chance. But at least I can think about staying here without despairing."

"Well, *I* can't! I. . . ." He lowered his head, suddenly drained of animation, still rubbing his ankle. "I'm sorry, Catherine. My leg's hurting again, and I'm in a foul mood." He cut his eyes toward her. "Have you got that stuff with you?"

"Yes." She made no move to get it for him.

"I realize I'm taking too much," he said. "It helps pass the time."

She bristled at that and wanted to ask if she was the reason for his boredom; but she repressed her anger, knowing that she was partly to blame for his dependency on the brianine, that during his convalescence she had responded to his demands for the drug as a lover and not as a nurse.

An impatient look crossed his face. "Can I have it?"

Reluctantly she opened her pack, removed a flask of water and some pellets of brianine wrapped in cloth, and handed them over. He fumbled at the cloth, hurrying to unscrew the cap of the flask, and then—as he was about to swallow two of the pellets—he noticed her watching him. His face tightened with anger, and he appeared ready to snap at her. But his expression softened, and he downed the pellets, held out two more. "Take some with me," he said. "I know I have to stop. And I will. But let's just relax today, let's pretend we don't have any troubles . . . all right?"

That was a ploy he had adopted recently, making her his accomplice

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in addiction and thus avoiding guilt; she knew she should refuse to join him, but at the moment she didn't have the strength for an argument. She took the pellets, washed them down with a swallow of water and lay back against the chamber wall. He settled beside her, leaning on one elbow, smiling, his eyes muddied-looking from the drug.

"You do have to stop, you know," she said.

His smile flickered, then steadied, as if his batteries were running low. "I suppose."

"If we're going to escape," she said, "you'll need a clear head."

He perked up at this. "That's a change."

"I haven't been thinking about escape for a long time. It didn't seem possible . . . it didn't even seem very important, anymore. I guess I'd given up on the idea. I mean just before you arrived, I'd been thinking about it again, but it wasn't serious . . . only frustration."

"And now?"

"It's become important again."

"Because of me, because I keep nagging about it?"

"Because of both of us. I'm not sure escape's possible, but I was wrong to stop trying."

He rolled onto his back, shielding his eyes with his forearm as if the heart's glow were too bright.

"John?" The name sounded thick and sluggish, and she could feel the drug taking her, making her drifty and slow.

"This place," he said. "This goddamn place."

"I thought—" she was beginning to have difficulty in ordering her words "—I thought you were excited by it. You used to talk. . . ."

"Oh, I am excited!" He laughed dully. "It's a storehouse of marvels. Fantastic! Overwhelming! It's too overwhelming. The feeling here. . . ." He turned to her. "Don't you feel it?"

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"How could you stand living here for all these years? Are you that much stronger than me, or are you just insensitive?"

"I'm . . ."

"God!" He turned away, stared at the heart wall, his face tattooed with a convoluted flow of light and shadow, then flaring gold. "You're so at ease here. Look at that." He pointed to the heart. "It's not a heart, it's a bloody act of magic. Every time I come here I get the feeling it's going to display a pattern that'll make me disappear. Or crush me. Or something. And you just sit there looking at it with a thoughtful expression as if you're planning to put in curtains or repaint the damn thing."

"We don't have to come here anymore."

"I can't stay away," he said, and held up a pellet of brianine. "It's like this stuff."

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They didn't speak for several minutes . . . perhaps a bit less, perhaps a little more. Time had become meaningless, and Catherine felt that she was floating away, her flesh suffused with a rosy warmth like the warmth of lovemaking. Flashes of dream imagery passed through her mind: a clown's monstrous face; an unfamiliar room with tilted walls and three-legged blue chairs; a painting whose paint was melting, dripping. The flashes lapsed into thoughts of John. He was becoming weaker every day, she realized. Losing his resilience, growing nervous and moody. She had tried to convince herself that sooner or later he would become adjusted to life inside Griaule, but she was beginning to accept the fact that he was not going to be able to survive here. She didn't understand why, whether it was due—as he had said—to the dragon's oppressiveness or to some inherent weakness. Or a combination of both. But she could no longer deny it, and the only option left was for them to effect an escape. It was easy to consider escape with the drug in her veins, feeling aloof and calm, possessed of a dreamlike overview; but she knew that once it wore off she would be at a loss as to how to proceed.

To avoid thinking, she let the heart's patterns dominate her attention. They seemed abnormally complex, and as she watched she began to have the impression of something new at work, some interior mechanism that she had never noticed before, and to become aware that the sense of imminence that pervaded the chamber was stronger than ever before; but she was so muzzy-headed that she could not concentrate upon these things. Her eyelids drooped, and she fell into her recurring dream of the sleeping dragon, focusing on the smooth scaleless skin of its chest, a patch of whiteness that came to surround her, to draw her into a world of whiteness with the serene constancy of its rhythmic rise and fall, as unvarying and predictable as the ticking of a perfect clock.

Over the next six months Catherine devised numerous plans for escape, but discarded them all as unworkable until at last she thought of one that—although far from foolproof—seemed in its simplicity to offer the least risk of failure. Though without brianine the plan would have failed, the process of settling upon this particular plan would have gone faster had drugs not been available; unable to resist the combined pull of the drug and John's need for companionship in his addiction, she herself had become an addict, and much of her time was spent lying at the heart with John, stupefied, too enervated even to make love. Her feelings toward John had changed; it could not have been otherwise, for he was not the man he had been. He had lost weight and muscle tone, grown vague and brooding, and she was concerned for the health of his body and soul. In some ways she felt closer than ever to him, her maternal instincts having been engaged by his dissolution; yet she couldn't help

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resenting the fact that he had failed her, that instead of offering relief, he had turned out to be a burden and a weakening influence; and as a result whenever some distance arose between them, she exerted herself to close it only if it was practical to do so. This was not often the case, because John had deteriorated to the point that closeness of any sort was a chore. However, Catherine clung to the hope that if they could escape, they would be able to make a new beginning.

The drug owned her. She carried a supply of pellets wherever she went, gradually increasing her dosages, and not only did it affect her health and her energy, it had a profound effect upon her mind. Her powers of concentration were diminished, her sleep became fitful, and she began to experience hallucinations. She heard voices, strange noises, and on one occasion she was certain that she had spotted old Amos Mauldry among a group of Feelys milling about at the bottom of the colony chamber. Her mental erosion caused her to mistrust the information of her senses and to dismiss as delusion the intimations of some climactic event that came to her in dreams and from the patterns of light and shadow on the heart; and recognizing that certain of her symptoms—hearkening to inaudible signals and the like—were similar to the behavior of the Feelys, she feared that she was becoming one of them. Yet this fear was not so pronounced as once it might have been. She sought now to be tolerant of them, to overlook their role in her imprisonment, perceiving them as unwitting agents of Griaule, and she could not be satisfied in hating either them or the dragon; Griaule and the subtle manifestations of his will were something too vast and incomprehensible to be a target for hatred, and she transferred all her wrath to Brianne, the woman who had betrayed her. The Feelys seemed to notice this evolution in her attitude, and they became more familiar, attaching themselves to her wherever she went, asking questions, touching her, and while this made it difficult to achieve privacy, in the end it was their increased affection that inspired her plan.

One day, accompanied by a group of giggling, chattering Feelys, she walked up toward the skull, to the channel that led to the cavity containing the ghostvine. She ducked into the channel, half-tempted to explore the cavity again; but she decided against this course and on crawling out of the channel, she discovered that the Feelys had vanished. Suddenly weak, as if their presence had been an actual physical support, she sank to her knees and stared along the narrow passage of pale red flesh that wound away into a golden murk like a burrow leading to a shining treasure. She felt a welling up of petulant anger at the Feelys for having deserted her. Of course she should have expected it. They shunned this area like. . . . She sat up, struck by a realization attendant to that thought. How far, she wondered, had the Feelys retreated? Could

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they have gone beyond the side passage that opened into the throat? She came to her feet and crept along the passage until she reached the curve. She peeked around it, and seeing no one, continued on, holding her breath until her chest began to ache. She heard voices, peered around the next curve, and caught sight of eight Feelys gathered by the entrance to the side passage, their silken rags agleam, their swords reflecting glints of the inconstant light. She went back around the curve, rested against the wall; she had trouble thinking, in shaping thought into a coherent stream, and out of reflex she fumbled in her pack for some brianine. Just touching one of the pellets acted to calm her, and once she had swallowed it she breathed easier. She fixed her eyes on the blurred shape of a vein buried beneath the glistening ceiling of the passage, letting the fluctuations of light mesmerize her. She felt she was blurring, becoming golden and liquid and slow, and in that feeling she found a core of confidence and hope.

There's a way, she told herself; *My God, maybe there really is a way.*

By the time she had fleshed out her plan three days later, her chief fear was that John wouldn't be able to function well enough to take part in it. He looked awful, his cheeks sunken, his color poor, and the first time she tried to tell him about the plan, he fell asleep. To counteract the brianine she began cutting his dosage, mixing it with the stimulant she had derived from the lichen growing on the dragon's lung, and after a few days, though his color and general appearance did not improve, he became more alert and energized. She knew the improvement was purely chemical, that the stimulant was a danger in his weakened state; but there was no alternative, and this at least offered him a chance at life. If he were to remain there, given the physical erosion caused by the drug, she did not believe he would last another six months.

It wasn't much of a plan, nothing subtle, nothing complex, and if she'd had her wits about her, she thought, she would have come up with it long before; but she doubted she would have had the courage to try it alone, and if there was trouble, then two people would stand a much better chance than one. John was elated by the prospect. After she had told him the particulars he paced up and down in their bedroom, his eyes bright, hectic spots of red dappling his cheeks, stopping now and again to question her or to make distracted comments.

"The Feelys," he said. "We . . . uh . . . we won't hurt them?"

"I told you . . . not unless it's necessary."

"That's good, that's good." He crossed the room to the curtains drawn across the entrance. "Of course it's not my field, but . . ."

"John?"

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He peered out at the colony through the gap in the curtains, the skin on his forehead washing from gold to dark. "Uh-huh."

"What's not your field?"

After a long pause he said, "It's not . . . nothing."

"You were talking about the Feelys."

"They're very interesting," he said distractedly. He swayed, then moved sluggishly toward her, collapsed on the pile of furs where she was sitting. He turned his face to her, looked at her with a morose expression. "It'll be better," he said. "Once we're out of here, I'll . . . I know I haven't been . . . strong. I haven't been . . ."

"It's all right," she said, stroking his hair.

"No, it's not, it's not." Agitated, he struggled to sit up, but she restrained him, telling him not to be upset, and soon he lay still. "How can you love me?" he asked after a long silence.

"I don't have any choice in the matter." She bent to him, pushing back her hair so it wouldn't hang in his face, kissed his cheek, his eyes.

He started to say something, then laughed weakly, and she asked him what he found amusing.

"I was thinking about free will," he said. "How improbable a concept that's become. Here. Where it's so obviously not an option."

She settled down beside him, weary of trying to boost his spirits. She remembered how he'd been after his arrival: eager, alive, and full of curiosity despite his injuries. Now his moments of greatest vitality—like this one—were spent in sardonic rejection of happy possibility. She was tired of arguing with him, of making the point that everything in life could be reduced by negative logic to a sort of pitiful reflex if that was the way you wanted to see it. His voice grew stronger, this prompted—she knew—by a rush of the stimulant within his system.

"It's Griaule," he said. "Everything here belongs to him, even the most fleeting of hopes and wishes. What we feel, what we think. When I was a student and first heard about Griaule, about his method of dominion, the omnipotent functioning of his will, I thought it was foolishness pure and simple. But I was an optimist, then. And optimists are only fools without experience. Of course I didn't think of myself as an optimist. I saw myself as a realist. I had a romantic notion that I was alone, responsible for my actions, and I perceived that as being a noble beauty, a refinement of the tragic . . . that state of utter and forlorn independence. I thought how cozy and unrealistic it was for people to depend on gods and demons to define their roles in life. I didn't know how terrible it would be to realize that nothing you thought or did had any individual importance, that everything, love, hate, your petty likes and dislikes, was part of some unfathomable scheme. I couldn't comprehend how worthless that knowledge would make you feel."

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He went on in this vein for some time, his words weighing on her, filling her with despair, pushing hope aside. Then, as if this monologue had aroused some bitter sexuality, he began to make love to her. She felt removed from the act, imprisoned within walls erected by his dour sentences; but she responded with desperate enthusiasm, her own arousal funded by a desolate purience. She watched his spread-fingered hands knead and cup her breasts, actions that seemed to her as devoid of emotional value as those of a starfish gripping a rock; and yet because of this desolation, because she wanted to deny it and also because of the voyeuristic thrill she derived from watching herself being taken, used, her body reacted with unusual fervor. The sweaty film between them was like a silken cloth, and their movements seemed more accomplished and supple than ever before; each jolt of pleasure brought her to new and dizzying heights. But afterward she felt devastated and defeated, not loved, and lying there with him, listening to the muted gabble of the Feelys from without, bathed in their rich stench, she knew she had come to the nadir of her life, that she had finally united with the Feelys in their enactment of a perturbed and animalistic rhythm.

Over the next ten days she set the plan into motion. She took to dispensing little sweet cakes to the Feelys who guarded her on her daily walks with John, ending up each time at the channel that led to the ghostvine. And she also began to spread the rumor that at long last her study of the dragon was about to yield its promised revelation. On the day of the escape, prior to going forth, she stood at the bottom of the chamber, surrounded by hundreds of Feelys, more hanging on ropes just above her, and called out in ringing tones, "Today I will have word for you! Griaule's word! Bring together the hunters and those who gather food, and have them wait here for me! I will return soon, very soon, and speak to you of what is to come!"

The Feelys jostled and pawed one another, chattering, tittering, hopping up and down, and some of those hanging from the ropes were so overcome with excitement that they lost their grip and fell, landing atop their fellows, creating squirming heaps of Feelys who squalled and yelped and then started fumbling with the buttons of each other's clothing. Catherine waved at them, and with John at her side, set out toward the cavity, six Feelys with swords at their rear.

John was terribly nervous and all during the walk he kept casting backward glances at the Feelys, asking questions that only served to unnerve Catherine. "Are you sure they'll eat them?" he said. "Maybe they won't be hungry."

"They always eat them while we're in the channel," she said. "You know that."

"I know," he said. "But I'm just . . . I don't want anything to go wrong."

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He walked another half a dozen paces. "Are you sure you put enough in the cakes?"

"I'm sure." She watched him out of the corner of her eye. The muscles in his jaw bunched, nerves twitched in his cheek. A light sweat had broken on his forehead, and his pallor was extreme. She took his arm. "How do you feel?"

"Fine," he said. "I'm fine."

"It's going to work, so don't worry . . . please."

"I'm fine," he repeated, his voice dead, eyes fixed straight ahead.

The Feelys came to a halt just around the curve from the channel, and Catherine, smiling at them, handed them each a cake; then she and John went forward and crawled into the channel. There they sat in the darkness without speaking, their hips touching. At last John whispered, "How much longer?"

"Let's give it a few more minutes . . . just to be safe."

He shuddered, and she asked again how he felt.

"A little shaky," he said. "But I'm all right."

She put her hand on his arm; his muscles jumped at the touch. "Calm down," she said, and he nodded. But there was no slackening of his tension.

The seconds passed with the slowness of sap welling from cut bark, and despite her certainty that all would go as planned, Catherine's anxiety increased. Little shiny squiggles, velvety darknesses blacker than the air, wormed in front of her eyes. She imagined that she heard whispers out in the passage. She tried to think of something else, but the concerns she erected to occupy her mind materialized and vanished with a superficial and formal precision that did nothing to ease her, seeming mere transparencies shunted across the vision of a fearful prospect ahead. Finally she gave John a nudge and they crept from the channel, made their way cautiously along the passage. When they reached the curve beyond which the Feelys were waiting, she paused, listened. Not a sound. She looked out. Six bodies lay by the entrance to the side passage; even at that distance she could spot the half-eaten cakes that had fallen from their hands. Still wary, they approached the Feelys, and as they came near, Catherine thought that there was something unnatural about their stillness. She knelt beside a young male, caught a whiff of loosened bowel, saw the rapt character of death stamped on his features and realized that in measuring out the dosages of brianine in each cake, she had not taken the Feelys' slightness of build into account. She had killed them.

"Come on!" said John. He had picked up two swords; they were so short, they looked toylike in his hands. He handed over one of the swords and helped her to stand. "Let's go . . . there might be more of them!"

He wetted his lips, glanced from side to side. With his sunken cheeks

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and hollowed eyes, his face had the appearance of a skull, and for a moment, dumbstruck by the realization that she had killed, by the understanding that for all her disparagement of them, the Feelys were human, Catherine failed to recognize him. She stared at them—like ugly dolls in the ruins of their gaud—and felt again that same chill emptiness that had possessed her when she had killed Key Willen. John caught her arm, pushed her toward the side passage; it was covered by a loose flap, and though she had become used to seeing the dragon's flesh everywhere, she now shrank from touching it. John pulled back the flap, urged her into the passage, and then they were crawling through a golden gloom, following a twisting downward course.

In places the passage was only a few inches wider than her hips, and they were forced to worm their way along. She imagined that she could feel the immense weight of the dragon pressing in upon her, pictured some muscle twitching in reflex, the passage constricting and crushing them. The closed space made her breathing sound loud, and for a while John's breathing sounded even louder, hoarse and labored. But then she could no longer hear it, and she discovered that he had fallen behind. She called out to him, and he said, "Keep going!"

She rolled onto her back in order to see him. He was gasping, his face twisted as if in pain. "What's wrong?" she cried, trying to turn completely, constrained from doing so by the narrowness of the passage.

He gave her a shove. "I'll be all right. Don't stop!"

"John!" She stretched out a hand to him, and he wedged his shoulder against her legs, pushing her along.

"Damn it . . . just keep going!" He continued to push and exhort her, and realizing that she could do nothing, she turned and crawled at an even faster pace, seeing his harrowed face in her mind's eye.

She couldn't tell how many minutes it took to reach the end of the passage; it was a timeless time, one long unfractionated moment of straining, squirming, pulling at the slick walls, her effort fueled by her concern; but when she scrambled out into the dragon's throat, her heart racing, for an instant she forgot about John, about everything except the sight before her. From where she stood the throat sloped upward and widened into the mouth, and through that great opening came a golden light, not the heavy mineral brilliance of Griaule's blood, but a fresh clear light, penetrating the tangled shapes of the thickets in beams made crystalline by dust and moisture—the light of day. She saw the tip of a huge fang hooking upward, stained gold with the morning sun, and the vault of the dragon's mouth above, with its vines and epiphytes. Stunned, gaping, she dropped her sword and went a couple of paces toward the light. It was so clean, so pure, its allure like a call. Remembering John,

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she turned back to the passage. He was pushing himself erect with his sword, his face flushed, panting.

"Look!" she said, hurrying to him, pointing at the light. "God, just look at that!" She steadied him, began steering him toward the mouth.

"We made it," he said. "I didn't believe we would."

His hand tightened on her arm in what she assumed was a sign of affection; but then his grip tightened cruelly, and he lurched backward.

"John!" She fought to hold onto him, saw that his eyes had rolled up into his head.

He sprawled onto his back, and she went down on her knees beside him, hands fluttering above his chest, saying, "John? John?" What felt like a shiver passed through his body, a faint guttering noise issued from his throat, and she knew, oh, she knew very well the meaning of that tremor, that signal passage of breath. She drew back, confused, staring at his face, certain that she had gotten things wrong, that in a second or two his eyelids would open. But they did not. "John?" she said, astonished by how calm she felt, by the measured tone of her voice, as if she were making a simple inquiry. She wanted to break through the shell of calmness, to let out what she was really feeling, but it was as if some strangely lucid twin had gained control over her muscles and will. Her face was cold, and she got to her feet, thinking that the coldness must be radiating from John's body and that distance would be a cure. The sight of him lying there frightened her, and she turned her back on him, folded her arms across her chest. She blinked against the daylight. It hurt her eyes, and the loops and interlacings of foliage standing out in silhouette also hurt her with their messy complexity, their disorder. She couldn't decide what to do. Get away, she told herself. Get out. She took a hesitant step toward the mouth, but that direction didn't make sense. No direction made sense, anymore.

Something moved in the bushes, but she paid it no mind. Her calm was beginning to crack, and a powerful gravity seemed to be pulling her back toward the body. She tried to resist. More movement. Leaves were rustling, branches being pushed aside. Lots of little movements. She wiped at her eyes. They were no tears in them, but something was hampering her vision, something opaque and thin, a tattered film. The shreds of her calm, she thought, and laughed . . . more a hiccup than a laugh. She managed to focus on the bushes and saw ten, twenty, no, more, maybe two or three dozen diminutive figures, pale mongrel children in glittering rags standing at the verge of the thicket. She hiccuped again, and this time it felt nothing like a laugh. A sob, or maybe nausea. The Feelys shifted nearer, edging toward her. The bastards had been waiting for them. She and John had never had a chance of escaping.

Catherine retreated to the body, reached down, groping for John's

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sword. She picked it up, pointed it at them. "Stay away from me," she said. "Just stay away, and I won't hurt you."

They came closer, shuffling, their shoulders hunched, their attitudes fearful, but advancing steadily all the same.

"Stay away!" she shouted. "I swear I'll kill you!" She swung the sword, making a windy arc through the air. "I swear!"

The Feelys gave no sign of having heard, continuing their advance, and Catherine, sobbing now, shrieked for them to keep back, swinging the sword again and again. They encircled her, standing just beyond range. "You don't believe me?" she said. "You don't believe I'll kill you? I don't have any reason not to." All her grief and fury broke through, and with a scream she lunged at the Feelys, stabbing one in the stomach, slicing a line of blood across the satin and gilt chest of another. The two she had wounded fell, shrilling their agony, and the rest swarmed toward her. She split the skull of another, split it as easily as she might have a melon, saw gore and splintered bone fly from the terrible wound, the dead male's face nearly halved, more blood leaking from around his eyes as he toppled, and then the rest of them were on her, pulling her down, pummeling her, giving little fey cries. She had no chance against them, but she kept on fighting, knowing that when she stopped, when she surrendered, she would have to start feeling, and that she wanted badly to avoid. Their vapid faces hovered above her, seeming uniformly puzzled, as if unable to understand her behavior, and the mildness of their reactions infuriated her. Death should have brightened them, made them—like her—hot with rage. Screaming again, her thoughts reddening, pumped with adrenaline, she struggled to her knees, trying to shake off the Feelys who clung to her arms. Snapping her teeth at fingers, faces, arms. Then something struck the back of her head, and she sagged, her vision whirling, darkness closing in until all she could see was a tunnel of shadow with someone's watery eyes at the far end. The eyes grew wider, merged into a single eye that became a shadow with leathery wings and a forked tongue and a belly full of fire that swooped down, open-mouthed, to swallow her up and fly her home.

7

The drug moderated Catherine's grief . . . or perhaps it was more than the drug. John's decline had begun so soon after they had met, it seemed she had become accustomed to sadness in relation to him, and thus his death had not overwhelmed her, but rather had manifested as an ache in her chest and a heaviness in her limbs, like small stones she was forced to carry about. To rid herself of that ache, that heaviness, she

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increased her use of the drug, eating the pellets as if they were candy, gradually withdrawing from life. She had no use for life any longer. She knew she was going to die within the dragon, knew it with the same clarity and certainty that accompanied all Griaule's sendings—death was to be her punishment for seeking to avoid his will, for denying his right to define and delimit her.

After the escape attempt, the Feelys had treated her with suspicion and hostility; recently they had been absorbed by some internal matter, agitated in the extreme, and they had taken to ignoring her. Without their minimal companionship, without John, the patterns flowing across the surface of the heart were the only thing that took Catherine out of herself, and she spent hours at a time watching them, lying there half-conscious, registering their changes through slitted eyes. As her addiction worsened, as she lost weight and muscle tone, she became even more expert in interpreting the patterns, and staring up at the vast curve of the heart, like the curve of a golden bell, she came to realize that Mauldry had been right, that the dragon was a god, an universe unto itself with its own laws and physical constants. A god that she hated. She would try to beam her hatred at the heart, hoping to cause a rupture, a seizure of some sort; but she knew that Griaule was impervious to this, impervious to all human weapons, and that her hatred would have as little effect upon him as an arrow loosed into an empty sky.

One day almost a year after John's death she waked abruptly from a dreamless sleep beside the heart, sitting bolt upright, feeling that a cold spike had been driven down the hollow of her spine. She rubbed sleep from her eyes, trying to shake off the lethargy of the drug, sensing danger at hand. Then she glanced up at the heart and was struck motionless. The patterns of shadow and golden radiance were changing more rapidly than ever before, and their complexity, too, was far greater than she had ever seen; yet they were as clear to her as her own script: pulsings of darkness and golden eddies flowing, unscrolling across the dimpled surface of the organ. It was a simple message, and for a few seconds she refused to accept the knowledge it conveyed, not wanting to believe that this was the culmination of her destiny, that her youth had been wasted in so trivial a matter; but recalling all the clues, the dreams of the sleeping dragon, the repetitious vision of the rise and fall of its chest. Mauldry's story of the first Feely, the exodus of animals and insects and birds, the muffled thud from deep within the dragon after which everything had remained calm for a thousand years . . . she knew it must be true.

As it had done a thousand years before, and as it would do again a thousand years in the future, the heart was going to beat.

She was infuriated, and she wanted to reject the fact that all her trials

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and griefs had been sacrifices made for the sole purpose of saving the Feelys. Her task, she realized, would be to clear them out of the chamber where they lived before it was flooded with the liquids that fueled the dragon's fires; and after the chamber had been emptied, she was to lead them back so they could go on with the work of keeping Griaule pest-free. The cause of their recent agitation, she thought, must have been due to their apprehension of the event, the result of one of Griaule's sendings; but because of their timidity they would tend to dismiss his warning, being more frightened of the outside world than of any peril within the dragon. They would need guidance to survive, and as once he had chose Mauldry to assist her, now Griaule had chosen her to guide the Feelys.

She staggered up, as befuddled as a bird trapped between glass walls, making little rushes this way and that; then anger overcame confusion, and she beat with her fists on the heart wall, bawling her hatred of the dragon, her anguish at the ruin he had made of her life. Finally, breathless, she collapsed, her own heart pounding erratically, trying to think what to do. She wouldn't tell them, she decided; she would just let them die when the chamber flooded, and this way have her revenge. But an instant later she reversed her decision, knowing that the Feely's deaths would merely be an inconvenience to Griaule, that he would simply gather a new group of idiots to serve him. And besides, she thought, she had already killed too many Feelys. There was no choice, she realized; over the span of almost eleven years she had been maneuvered by the dragon's will to this place and moment where, by virtue of her shaped history and conscience, she had only one course of action.

Full of muddle-headed good intentions, she made her way back to the colony, her guards trailing behind, and when she had reached the chamber, she stood with her back to the channel that led toward the throat, uncertain of how to proceed. Several hundred Feelys were milling about the bottom of the chamber, and others were clinging to ropes, hanging together in front of one or another of the cubicles, looking in that immense space like clusters of glittering, many-colored fruit; the constant motion and complexity of the colony added to Catherine's hesitancy and bewilderment, and when she tried to call out to the Feelys, to gain their attention, she managed only a feeble, scratchy noise. But she gathered her strength and called out again and again, until at last they were all assembled before her, silent and staring, hemming her in against the entrance to the channel, next to some chests that contained the torches and swords and other items used by the hunters. The Feelys gawped at her, plucking at their gaudy rags; their silence seemed to have a slow vibration. Catherine started to speak, but faltered; she took a deep breath, let it out explosively and made a second try.

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"We have to leave," she said, hearing the shakiness of her voice. "We have to go outside. Not for long. Just for a little while . . . a few hours. The chamber, it's going. . . ." She broke off, realizing that they weren't following her. "The thing Griaule has meant me to learn," she went on in a louder voice, "at last I know it. I know why I was brought to you. I know the purpose for which I have studied all these years. Griaule's heart is going to beat, and when it does the chamber will fill with liquid. If you remain here, you'll all drown."

The front ranks shifted, and some of the Feelys exchanged glances, but otherwise they displayed no reaction.

Catherine shook her fists in frustration. "You'll die if you don't listen to me! You have to leave! When the heart contracts, the chamber will be flooded . . . don't you understand?" She pointed up to the mist-hung ceiling of the chamber. "Look! The birds . . . the birds have gone! They know what's coming! And so do you! Don't you feel the danger? I know you do!"

They edged back, some of them turning away, entering into whispered exchanges with their fellows.

Catherine grabbed the nearest of them, a young female dressed in ruby silks. "Listen to me!" she shouted.

"Liar, Cat'rine, liar," said one of the males, jerking the female away from her. "We not goin' be mo' fools."

"I'm not lying! I'm not!" She went from one to another, putting her hands on their shoulders, meeting their eyes in an attempt to impress them with her sincerity. "The heart is going to beat! Once . . . just once. You won't have to stay outside long. Not long at all."

They were all walking away, all beginning to involve themselves in their own affairs, and Catherine, desperate, hurried after them, pulling them back, saying, "Listen to me! Please!" Explaining what was to happen, and receiving cold stares in return. One of the males shoved her aside, baring his teeth in a hiss, his eyes blank and bright, and she retreated to the entrance of the channel, feeling rattled and disoriented, in need of another pellet. She couldn't collect her thoughts, and she looked around in every direction as if hoping to find some sight that would steady her; but nothing she saw was of any help. Then her gaze settled on the chests where the swords and torches were stored. She felt as if her head were being held in a vise and forced toward the chests, and the knowledge of what she must do was a coldness inside her head—the unmistakable touch of Griaule's thought. It was the only way. She saw that clearly. But the idea of doing something so extreme frightened her, and she hesitated, looking behind her to make sure that none of the Feelys were keeping track of her movements. She inched toward the chests, keeping her eyes lowered, trying to make it appear that she

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was moving aimlessly. In one of the chests were a number of tinderboxes resting beside some torches; she stooped, grabbed a torch and one of the tinderboxes, and went walking briskly up the slope. She paused by the lowest rank of cubicles, noticed that some of the Feelys had turned to watch her; when she lit the torch, alarm surfaced in their faces and they surged up the slope toward her. She held the torch up to the curtains that covered the entrance to the cubicle, and the Feelys fell back, muttering, some letting out piercing wails.

"Please!" Catherine cried, her knees rubbery from the tension, a chill knot in her breast. "I don't want to do this! But you have to leave!"

A few of the Feelys edged toward the channel, and encouraged by this, Catherine shouted, "Yes! That's it! If you'll just go outside, just for a little while, I won't have to do it!"

Several Feelys entered the channel, and the crowd around Catherine began to erode, whimpering, breaking into tears, trickles of five and six at a time breaking away and moving out of sight within the channel, until there were no more than thirty of them left within the chamber, forming a ragged semi-circle around her. She would have liked to believe that they would do as she had suggested without further coercion on her part, but she knew that they were all packed into the channel or the chamber beyond, waiting for her to put down the torch. She gestured at the Feelys surrounding her, and they, too, began easing toward the channel; when only a handful of them remained visible, she touched the torch to the curtains.

She was amazed by how quickly the fire spread, rushing like waves up the silk drapes, following the rickety outlines of the cubicles, appearing to dress them in a fancywork of reddish yellow flame, making crispy, chuckling noises. The fire seemed to have a will of its own, to be playfully seeking out all the intricate shapes of the colony and illuminating them, the separate flames chasing one another with merry abandon, sending little trains of fire along poles and stanchions, geysering up from corners, flinging out fiery fingers to touch tips across a gap.

She was so caught up in this display, her drugged mind finding in it an aesthetic, that she forgot all about the Feelys, and when a cold sharp pain penetrated her left side, she associated this not with them but thought it a side-effect of the drug, a sudden attack brought on by her abuse of it. Then, horribly weak, sinking to her knees, she saw one of them standing next to her, a male with a pale thatch of thinning hair wisping across his scalp, holding a sword tipped with red, and she knew that he had stabbed her. She had the giddy urge to speak to him, not out of anger, just to ask a question that she wasn't able to speak, for instead of being afraid of the weakness invading her limbs, she had a terrific curiosity about what would happen next, and she had the irrational

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thought that her executioner might have the answer, that in his role as the instrument of Griaule's will he might have some knowledge of absolutes. He spat something at her, an accusation or an insult made inaudible by the crackling of the flames, and fled down the slope and out of the chamber, leaving her alone. She rolled onto her back, gazing at the fire, and the pain seemed to roll inside her as if it were a separate thing. Some of the cubicles were collapsing, spraying sparks, twists of black smoke boiling up, smoldering pieces of blackened wood tumbling down to the chamber floor, the entire structure appearing to ripple through the heat haze, looking unreal, an absurd construction of flaming skeletal framework and billowing, burning silks, and growing dizzy, feeling that she was falling upward into that huge fiery space, Catherine passed out.

She must have been unconscious for only a matter of seconds, because nothing had changed when she opened her eyes, except that a section of the fabric covering the chamber floor had caught fire. The flames were roaring, the snap and cracking of timbers as sharp as explosions, and her nostrils were choked with an acrid stink. With a tremendous effort that brought her once again to the edge of unconsciousness, she came to her feet, clutching the wound in her side, and stumbled toward the channel; at the entrance she fell and crawled into it, choking on the smoke that poured along the passageway. Her eyes teared from the smoke, and she wriggled on her stomach, pulling herself along with her hands. She nearly passed out half a dozen times before reaching the adjoining chamber, and then she staggered, crawled, stopping frequently to catch her breath, to let the pain of her wound subside, somehow negotiating a circuitous path among the pools of burning liquid and the pale red warty bumps that sprouted everywhere. Then into the throat. She wanted to surrender to the darkness there, to let go, but she kept going, not motivated by fear, but by some reflex of survival, simply obeying the impulse to continue for as long as it was possible. Her eyes blurred, and darkness frittered at the edges of her vision. But even so, she was able to make out the light of day, the menagerie of shapes erected by the interlocking branches of the thickets, and she thought that now she could stop, that this had been what she wanted—to see the light again, not to die bathed in the uncanny radiance of Griaule's blood.

She lay down, lowering herself cautiously among a bed of ferns, her back against the side of the throat, the same position—she remembered—in which she had fallen asleep that first night inside the dragon so many years before. She started to slip, to dwindle inside herself, but was alerted by a whispery rustling that grew louder and louder, and a moment later swarms of insects began to pour from the dragon's throat, passing overhead with a whirring rush and in such density that they cut

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off most of the light issuing from the mouth. Far above, like the shadows of spiders, apes were swinging on the vines that depended from the roof of the mouth, heading for the outer world, and Catherine could hear smaller animals scuttling through the brush. The sight of these flights made her feel accomplished, secure in what she had done, and she settled back, resting her head against Griaule's flesh, as peaceful as she could ever recall, almost eager to be done with life, with drugs and solitude and violence. She had a moment's worry about the Feelys, wondering where they were; but then she realized that they would probably do no differently than had their remote ancestor, that they would hide in the thickets until all was calm.

She let her eyes close. The pain of the wound had diminished to a distant throb that scarcely troubled her, and the throbbing made a rhythm that seemed to be bearing her up. Somebody was talking to her, saying her name, and she resisted the urge to open her eyes, not wanting to be called back. She must be hearing things, she thought. But the voice persisted, and at last she did open her eyes. She gave a weak laugh on seeing Amos Mauldry kneeling before her, wavering and vague as a ghost, and realized that she was seeing things, too.

"Catherine," he said. "Can you hear me?"

"No," she said, and laughed again, a laugh that sent her into a bout of gasping; she felt her weakness in a new and poignant way, and it frightened her.

"Catherine?"

She blinked, trying to make him disappear; but he appeared to solidify as if she were becoming more part of his world than that of life. "What is it, Mauldry?" she said, and coughed. "Have you come to guide me to heaven . . . is that it?"

His lips moved, and she had the idea that he was trying to reassure her of something; but she couldn't hear his words, no matter how hard she strained her ears. He was beginning to fade, becoming opaque, proving himself to be no more than a phantom; yet as she blacked out, experiencing a final moment of panic, Catherine could have sworn that she felt him take her hand.

She waked in a golden glow that dimmed and brightened, and found herself staring into a face; after a moment, a long moment, because the face was much different than she had imagined it during these past few years, she recognized that it was hers. She lay still, trying to accommodate to this state of affairs, wondering why she wasn't dead, puzzling over the face and uncertain as to why she wasn't afraid; she felt strong and alert and at peace. She sat up and discovered that she was naked, that she was sitting in a small chamber lit by veins of golden blood

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branching across the ceiling, its walls obscured by vines with glossy dark green leaves. The body—her body—was lying on its back, and one side of the shirt it wore was soaked with blood. Folded beside the body was a fresh shirt, trousers, and resting atop these was a pair of sandals.

She checked her side—there was no sign of a wound. Her emotions were a mix of relief and self-loathing. She understood that somehow she had been conveyed to this cavity, to the ghostvine, and her essences had been transferred to a likeness, and yet she had trouble accepting the fact, because she felt no different than she had before . . . except for the feelings of peace and strength, and the fact that she had no craving for the drug. She tried to deny what had happened, to deny that she was now a thing, the bizarre contrivance of a plant, and it seemed that her thoughts, familiar in their ordinary process, were proofs that she must be wrong in her assumption. However, the body was an even more powerful evidence to the contrary. She would have liked to take refuge in panic, but her overall feeling of well-being prevented this. She began to grow cold, her skin pebbling, and reluctantly she dressed in the clothing folded beside the body. Something hard in the breast pocket of the shirt. She opened the pocket, took out a small leather sack; she loosed the tie of the sack and from it poured a fortune of cut gems into her hand: diamonds, emeralds, and sunstones. She put the sack back into the pocket, not knowing what to make of the stones, and sat looking at the body. It was much changed from its youth, leaner, less voluptuous, and in the repose of death, the face had lost its gloss and perfection, and was merely the face of an attractive woman . . . a disheartened woman. She thought she should feel something, that she should be oppressed by the sight, but she had no reaction to it; it might have been a skin she had shed, something of no more consequence than that.

She had no idea where to go, but realizing that she couldn't stay there forever, she stood and with a last glance at the body, she made her way down the narrow channel leading away from the cavity. When she emerged into the passage, she hesitated, unsure of which direction to choose, unsure, too, of which direction was open to her. At length, deciding not to tempt Griaule's judgment, she headed back toward the colony, thinking that she would take part in helping them rebuild; but before she had gone ten feet she heard Mauldry's voice calling her name.

He was standing by the entrance to the cavity, dressed as he had been that first night—in a satin frock coat, carrying his gold-knobbed cane—and as she approached him, a smile broke across his wrinkled face, and he nodded as if in approval of her resurrection. "Surprised to see me?" he asked.

"I . . . I don't know," she said, a little afraid of him. "Was that you . . . in the mouth?"

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He favored her with a polite bow. "None other. After things settled down, I had some of the Feelys bear you to the cavity. Or rather I was the instrument that effected Griaule's will in the matter. Did you look in the pocket of your shirt?"

"Yes."

"Then you found the gems. Good, good."

She was at a loss for words at first. "I thought I saw you once before," she said finally. "A few years back."

"I'm sure you did. After my rebirth—" he gestured toward the cavity "—I was no longer of any use to you. You were forging your own path and my presence would have hampered your process. So I hid among the Feelys, waiting for the time when you would need me." He squinted at her. "You look troubled."

"I don't understand any of this," she said. "How can I feel like my old self, when I'm obviously so different?"

"Are you?" he asked. "Isn't sameness or difference mostly a matter of feeling?" He took her arm, steered her along the passage away from the colony. "You'll adjust to it, Catherine. I have, and I had the same reaction as you when I first awoke." He spread his arms, inviting her to examine him. "Do I look different to you? Aren't I the same old fool as ever?"

"So it seems," she said drily. She walked a few paces in silence, then something occurred to her. "The Feelys . . . do they. . . ."

"Rebirth is only for the chosen, the select. The Feelys receive another sort of reward, one not given me to understand."

"You call this a reward? To be subject to more of Griaule's whims? And what's next for me? Am I to discover when his bowels are due to move?"

He stopped walking, frowning at her. "Next? Why, whatever pleases you, Catherine. I've been assuming that you'd want to leave, but you're free to do as you wish. Those gems I gave you will buy you any kind of life you desire."

"I can leave?"

"Most assuredly. You've accomplished your purpose here, and you're your own agent now. *Do* you want to leave?"

Catherine looked at him, unable to speak, and nodded.

"Well, then." He took her arm again. "Let's be off."

As they walked down to the chamber behind the throat and then into the throat itself, Catherine felt as one is supposed to feel at the moment of death, all the memories of her life within the dragon passing before her eyes with their attendant emotions—her flight, her labors and studies, John, the long hours spent beside the heart—and she thought that this was most appropriate, because she was not re-entering life but rather passing through into a kind of afterlife, a place beyond death that would be as unfamiliar and new a place as Griaule himself had once seemed.

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And she was astounded to realize that she was frightened of these new possibilities, that the thing she had wanted for so long could pose a menace and that it was the dragon who now offered the prospect of security. On several occasions she considered turning back, but each time she did, she rebuked herself for her timidity and continued on. However, on reaching the mouth and wending her way through the thickets, her fear grew more pronounced. The sunlight, that same light that not so many months before had been alluring, now hurt her eyes and made her want to draw back into the dim golden murk of Griaule's blood; and as they neared the lip, as she stepped into the shadow of a fang, she began to tremble with cold and stopped, hugging herself to keep warm.

Mauldry took up a position facing her, jogged her arm. "What is it?" he asked. "You seem frightened."

"I am," she said; she glanced up at him. "Maybe . . ."

"Don't be silly," he said. "You'll be fine once you're away from here. And—" he cocked his eye toward the declining sun "—you should be pushing along. You don't want to be hanging about the mouth when it's dark. I doubt anything would harm you, but since you're no longer part of Griaule's plan . . . well, better safe than sorry." He gave her a push. "Get along with you, now."

"You're not coming with me?"

"Me?" Mauldry chuckled. "What would I do out there? I'm an old man, set in my ways. No, I'm far better off staying with the Feelys. I've become half a Feely myself after all these years. But you're young, you've got a whole world of life ahead of you." He nudged her forward. "Do what I say, girl. There's no use in your hanging about any longer."

She went a couple of steps toward the lip, paused, feeling sentimental about leaving the old man; though they had never been close, he had been like a father to her . . . and thinking this, remembering her real father, whom she had scarcely thought of these last years, with whom she'd had the same lack of closeness, that made her aware of all the things she had to look forward to, all the lost things she might now regain. She moved into the thickets with a firmer step, and behind her, old Mauldry called to her for a last time.

"That's my girl!" he sang out. "You just keep going, and you'll start to feel at rights soon enough! There's nothing to be afraid of . . . nothing you can avoid, in any case! Goodbye, goodbye!"

She glanced back, waved, saw him shaking his cane in a gesture of farewell, and laughed at his eccentric appearance: a funny little man in satin rags hopping up and down in that great shadow between the fangs. Out from beneath that shadow herself, the rich light warmed her, seeming to penetrate and dissolve all the coldness that had been lodged in her bones and thoughts.

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"Goodbye!" cried Mauldry. "Goodbye! Don't be sad! You're not leaving anything important behind, and you're taking the best parts with you. Just walk fast and think about what you're going to tell everyone. They'll be amazed by all you've done! Flabbergasted! Tell them about Griaule! Tell them what he's like, tell them all you've seen and all you've learned. Tell them what a grand adventure you've had!"

8

Returning to Hangtown was in some ways a more unsettling experience than had been Catherine's flight into the dragon. She had expected the place to have changed, and while there *had* been minor changes, she had assumed that it would be as different from its old self as was she. But standing at the edge of the village, looking out at the gray weathered shacks ringing the fouled shallows of the lake, thin smokes issuing from tin chimneys, the cliff of the fronto-parietal plate casting its gloomy shadow, the chokecherry thickets, the hawthornes, the dark brown dirt of the streets, three elderly men sitting on cane chairs in front of one of the shacks, smoking their pipes and staring back at her with unabashed curiosity . . . superficially it was no different than it had been ten years before, and this seemed to imply that her years of imprisonment, her death and rebirth had been of small importance. She did not demand that they be important to anyone else, yet it galled her that the world had passed through those years of ordeal without significant scars, and it also imbued her with the irrational fear that if she were to enter the village, she might suffer some magical slippage back through time and reinhabit her old life. At last, with a hesitant step, she walked over to the men and wished them a good morning.

"Mornin'," said a paunchy fellow with a mottled bald scalp and a fringe of gray beard, whom she recognized as Tim Weedlon. "What can I do for you, ma'am? Got some nice bits of scale inside."

"That place over there—" she pointed to an abandoned shack down the street, its roof holed and missing the door "—where can I find the owner?"

The other man, Mardo Koren, thin as a mantis, his face seamed and blotched, said, "Can't nobody say for sure. Ol' Riall died . . . must be goin' on nine, ten years back."

"He's dead?" She felt weak inside, dazed.

"Yep," said Tim Weedlon, studying her face, his brow furrowed, his expression bewildered. "His daughter run away, killed a village man name of Willen and vanished into nowhere . . . or so ever'body figured. Then when Willen's brothers turned up missin', people thought ol' Riall must done 'em. He didn't deny it. Acted like he didn't care whether he

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lived or died."

"What happened?"

"They had a trial, found Riall guilty." He leaned forward, squinting at her. "Catherine . . . is that you?"

She nodded, struggling for control. "What did they do with him?"

"How can it be you?" he said. "Where you been?"

"What happened to my father?"

"God, Catherine. You know what happens to them that's found guilty of murder. If it's any comfort, the truth come out finally."

"They took him in under the wing . . . they left him under the wing?" Her fists clenched, nails pricking hard into her palm. "Is that what they did?" He lowered his eyes, picked at a fray on his trouserleg.

Her eyes filled, and she turned away, facing the mossy overhang of the fronto-parietal plate. "You said the truth came out."

"That's right. A girl confessed to having seen the whole thing. Said the Willens chased you into Griaule's mouth. She woulda come forward sooner, but ol' man Willen had her feared for her life. Said he'd kill her if she told. You probably remember her. Friend of yours, if I recall. Brianne." She whirled around, repeated the name with venom.

"Wasn't she your friend?" Weedlon asked.

"What happened to her?"

"Why . . . nothing," said Weedlon. "She's married, got hitched to Zev Mallison. Got herself a batch of children. I 'spect she's home now if you wanna see her. You know the Mallison place, don'tcha?"

"Yes."

"You want to know more about it, you oughta drop by there and talk to Brianne."

"I guess . . . I will, I'll do that."

"Now tell us where you been, Catherine. Ten years! Musta been something important to keep you from home for so long."

Coldness was spreading through her, turning her to ice. "I was thinking, Tim . . . I was thinking I might like to do some scaling while I'm here. Just for old time's sake, you know." She could hear the shakiness in her voice and tried to smooth it out; she forced a smile. "I wonder if I could borrow some hooks."

"Hooks?" He scratched his head, still regarding her with confusion. "Sure, I suppose you can. But aren't you going to tell us where you've been? We thought you were dead."

"I will, I promise. Before I leave . . . I'll come back and tell you all about it. All right?"

"Well, all right." He heaved up from his chair. "But it's a cruel thing you're doing, Catherine."

"No crueler than what's been done to me," she said distractedly. "Not

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half so cruel."

"Pardon," said Tim. "How's that?"

"What?"

He gave her a searching look and said, "I was telling you it was a cruel thing, keeping an old man in suspense about where you've been. Why you're going to make the choicest bit of gossip we've had in years. And you came back with . . ."

"Oh! I'm sorry," she said. "I was thinking about something else."

The Mallison place was among the larger shanties in Hangtown, half a dozen rooms, most of which had been added on over the years since Catherine had left; but its size was no evidence of wealth or status, only of a more expansive poverty. Next to the steps leading to a badly hung door was a litter of bones and mango skins and other garbage. Fruit flies hovered above a watermelon rind; a gray dog with its ribs showing slunk off around the corner, and there was a stink of fried onions and boiled greens. From inside came the squalling of a child. The shanty looked false to Catherine, an unassuming façade behind which lay a monstrous reality—the woman who had betrayed her, killed her father—and yet its drabness was sufficient to disarm her anger somewhat. But as she mounted the steps there was a thud as of something heavy falling, and a woman shouted. The voice was harsh, deeper than Catherine remembered, but she knew it must belong to Brianne, and that restored her vengeful mood. She knocked on the door with one of Tim Weedlon's scaling hooks, and a second later it was flung open and she was confronted by an olive-skinned woman in torn gray skirts—almost the same color as the weathered boards, as if she were the quintessential product of the environment—and gray streaks in her dark brown hair. She looked Catherine up and down, her face hard with displeasure, and said, "What do you want?"

It was Brianne, but Brianne warped, melted, disfigured as a waxwork might be disfigured by heat. Her waist gone, features thickened, cheeks sagging into jowls. Shock washed away Catherine's anger, and shock, too, materialized in Brianne's face. "No," she said, giving the word an abstracted value, as if denying an inconsequential accusation; then she shouted it: "No!" She slammed the door, and Catherine pounded on it, crying, "Damn you! Brianne!"

The child screamed, but Brianne made no reply.

Enraged, Catherine swung the hook at the door; the point sank deep into the wood, and when she tried to pull it out, one of the boards came partially loose; she pried at it, managed to rip it away, the nails coming free with a shriek of tortured metal. Through the gap she saw Brianne cowering against the rear wall of a dilapidated room, her arms around

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a little boy in shorts. Using the hook as a lever, she pulled loose another board, reached in and undid the latch. Brianne pushed the child behind her and grabbed a broom as Catherine stepped inside.

"Get out of here!" she said, holding the broom like a spear.

The gray poverty of the shanty made Catherine feel huge in her anger, too bright for the place, like a sun shining in a cave, and although her attention was fixed on Brianne, the peripheral details of the room imprinted themselves on her: the wood stove upon which a covered pot was steaming; an overturned wooden chair with a hole in the seat; cobwebs spanning the corners, rat turds along the wall; a rickety table set with cracked dishes and dust thick as fur beneath it. These things didn't arouse her pity or mute her anger; instead, they seemed extensions of Brianne, new targets for hatred. She moved closer, and Brianne jabbed the broom at her. "Go away," she said weakly. "Please . . . leave us alone!"

Catherine swung the hook, snagging the twine that bound the broom straws and knocking it from Brianne's hands. Brianne retreated to the corner where the wood stove stood, hauling the child along. She held up her hand to ward off another blow and said, "Don't hurt us."

"Why not? Because you've got children, because you've had an unhappy life?" Catherine spat at Brianne. "You killed my father!"

"I was afraid! Key's father . . ."

"I don't care," said Catherine coldly. "I don't care why you did it. I don't care how good your reasons were for betraying me in the first place."

"That's right! You never cared about anything!" Brianne clawed at her breast. "You killed my heart! You didn't care about Glynn, you just wanted him because he wasn't yours!"

It took Catherine a few seconds to dredge that name up from memory, to connect it with Brianne's old lover and recall that it was her callousness and self-absorption that had set the events of the past ten years in motion. But although this roused her guilt, it did not abolish her anger. She couldn't equate Brianne's crimes with her excesses. Still, she was confused about what to do, uncomfortable now with the very concept of justice, and she wondered if she should leave, just throw down the hook and leave vengeance to whatever ordering principle governed the fates in Hangtown. Then Brianne shifted her feet, made a noise in her throat, and Catherine felt rage boiling up inside her.

"Don't throw that up to me," she said with flat menace. "Nothing I've done to you merited what you did to me. You don't even know what you did!" She raised the hook, and Brianne shrank back into the corner. The child twisted its head to look at Catherine, fixing her with brimming eyes, and she held back.

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"Send the child away," she told Brianne.

Brianne leaned down to the child. "Go to your father," she said.

"No, wait," said Catherine, fearing that the child might bring Zev Mallison.

"Must you kill us both?" said Brianne, her voice hoarse with emotion. Hearing this, the child once more began to cry.

"Stop it," Catherine said to him, and when he continued to cry, she shouted it.

Brianne muffled the child's wails in her skirts. "Go ahead!" she said, her face twisted with fear. "Just do it!" She broke down into sobs, ducked her head and waited for the blow. Catherine stepped close to Brianne, yanked her head back by the hair, exposing her throat, and set the point of the hook against the big vein there. Brianne's eyes rolled down, trying to see the hook; her breath came in gaspy shrieks, and the child, caught between the two women, squirmed and wailed. Catherine's hand was trembling, and that slight motion pricked Brianne's skin, drawing a bead of blood. She stiffened, her eyelids fluttered down, her mouth fell open—an expression, at least so it seemed to Catherine, of ecstatic expectation. Catherine studied the face, feeling as if her emotions were being purified; drawn into a fine wire; she had an almost aesthetic appreciation of the stillness gathering around her, the hard poise of Brianne's musculature, the sensitive pulse in the throat that transmitted its frail rhythm along the hook, and she restrained herself from pressing the point deeper, wanting to prolong Brianne's suffering.

But then the hook grew heavy in Catherine's hands, and she understood that the moment had passed, that her need for vengeance had lost the immediacy and thrust of passion. She imagined herself skewering Brianne, and then imagined dragging her out to confront a village tribunal, forcing her to confess her lies, having her sentenced to be tied up and left for whatever creatures foraged beneath Griaule's wing. But while it provided her a measure of satisfaction to picture Brianne dead or dying, she saw now that anticipation was the peak of vengeance, that carrying out the necessary actions would only harm her. It frustrated her that all these years and the deaths would have no resolution, and she thought that she must have changed more than she had assumed to put aside vengeance so easily; this caused her to wonder again about the nature of the change, to question whether she was truly herself or merely an arcane likeness. But then she realized that the change had been her resolution, and that vengeance was an artifact of her old life, nothing more, and that her new life, whatever its secret character, must find other concerns to fuel it apart from old griefs and unworthy passions. This struck her with the force of a revelation, and she let out a long sighing breath that seemed to carry away with it all the sad vibrations

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of the past, all the residues of hates and loves, and she could finally believe that she was no longer the dragon's prisoner. She felt new in her whole being, subject to new compulsions, as alive as tears, as strong as wheat, far too strong and alive for this pallid environment, and she could hardly recall now why she had come.

She looked at Brianne and her son, feeling only the ghost of hatred, seeing them not as objects of pity or wrath, but as unfamiliar, irrelevant, lives trapped in the prison of their own self-regard, and without a word she turned and walked to the steps, slamming the hook deep into the boards of the wall, a gesture of fierce resignation, the closing of a door opening onto anger and the opening of one that led to uncharted climes, and went down out of the village, leaving old Tim Weedlon's thirst for gossip unquenched, passing along Griaule's back, pushing through thickets and fording streams, and not noticing for quite some time that she had crossed onto another hill and left the dragon far behind. Three weeks later she came to Cabrecavela, a small town at the opposite end of the Carbonales Valley, and there, using the gems provided her by Mauldry, she bought a house and settled in and began to write about Griaule, creating not a personal memoir but a reference work containing an afterword dealing with certain metaphysical speculations, for she did not wish her adventures published, considering them banal by comparison to her primary subjects, the dragon's physiology and ecology. After the publication of her book, which she entitled *The Heart's Millennium,* she experienced a brief celebrity; but she shunned most of the opportunities for travel and lecture and lionization that came her way, and satisfied her desire to impart the knowledge she had gained by teaching in the local school and speaking privately with those scientists from Port Chantay who came to interview her. Some of these visitors had been colleagues of John Colmacos, yet she never mentioned their relationship, believing that her memories of the man needed no modification; but perhaps this was less than an honest self-appraisal, perhaps she had not come to terms with that portion of her past, for in the spring five years after she had returned to the world she married one of these scientists, a man named Brian Ocoi, who in his calm demeanor and modest easiness of speech appeared cast from the same mold as Colmacos. From that point on little is known of her other than the fact that she bore two sons and confined her writing to a journal that has gone unpublished. However, it is said of her—as is said of all those who perform similar acts of faith in the shadows of other dragons yet unearthed from beneath their hills of ordinary-seeming earth and grass, believing that their bond serves through gentle constancy to enhance and not further delimit the boundaries of this prison world—from that day forward she lived happily ever after. Except for the dying at the end. And the heartbreak in-between. ●

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(Continued from page 14.)

is a bit static and most people interested in fantasy games will probably want heartier fare.

Enter *Dungeonquest,* just released by GW. This game was acquired from the Swedish company Brio, and its novel features took the designers and developers of GW by storm. At first glance *Dungeonquest* doesn't seem all that different from any other dungeon game. There are tiles to be drawn which are used to build the labyrinthine hallways and corridors of the dungeon. There are monsters and treasures, and the obligatory dragon.

But the game introduces a variety of novel ideas that make it more involving and interesting than almost any other game. There are still characters (like the archer El-Adoran and beefy Sir Rohan). And yes, they have characteristics, such as Strength, Agility, Armour, and Luck, all of use in facing the dangers of the dungeon.

But in *Dungeonquest* the tiles used to build the dungeon have surprises. There are bottomless pits and cave-ins, and rooms that turn around as soon as you enter them, sealing off your path of retreat. Some rooms have doors which may or may not open, depending on the card drawn from the Door deck.

It is, in fact, the many decks of cards in *Dungeonquest* which make the game so much fun. There are Crypt cards for when you search a crypt, and Body Cards when you stumble across some unlucky adventurer. The Search Cards can provide life-saving potions, treasure, and traps that will have you using your Luck.

The Combat system also has some neat touches. A character has a choice of three maneuvers, Escape, Wait and See, or Attack. A Monster card is drawn, which reveals the monster's response to said choice. If there's a battle, both the monster and the character get to choose three different types of combat. An easily used grid reveals the result . . . who gets hit, and how much damage is done.

Also, the monster's hit points are kept secret so you never know if the monster is almost knocked out, or still has a few good rounds left in him.

If your character survives to reach the center of the dungeon, he/she will discover a treasure hoard . . . and a dragon. Another deck of cards is filled with sleeping dragons, and one wide-awake dragon. Your character can linger in the treasure room, drawing treasure and hoping that the dragon stays asleep.

Like most things in life, a bit too much greed can prove fatal.

Also recommended is GW's *The Fury of Dracula.* A very clever game in a genre that's practically non-existant (horror games). While a tad low on atmosphere, the game does a wonderful job of gaming-out the hunt for Bram Stoker's vampire. ●

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

Note the postmark deadlines for this and next year's WorldCons. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 4271 Duke St. #D-10, Alexandria, VA 22304. The hot line is (703) 823–3117. If a machine answers, leave your area code & number. I'll call back on my nickel. Early evening's often a good time to phone cons (many phones are homes; be polite). When writing cons, enclose an SASE. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, with a music keyboard.

JULY, 1988

15-17—**Archon.** For info, write: **Box 50125, Clayton MO 63105.** Or call: **(314) 421-2860** (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). Con will be held in: St. Louis MO (if city omitted, same as in address) at airport Henry VIII Inn. Guests will include: Chelsea Q. Yarbro, Real Musgrave, Charles L. Grant.

22-24—**UniCon.** Holiday Inn, Annapolis MD (near Washington DC). Vernor ("Peace War") Vinge.

22-24—**ConVersion. (403) 242-1807.** Robert (Lord Valentine) Silverberg, Ed Bryant workshops.

29-31—**PhroliCon, 652 Van Kirk, Philadelphia PA 19120.** The relaxacon done by the PhilCon people.

29-31—**Ditto, % Glicksohn, 508 Windermere Ave., Toronto ON M6S 3L6.** Like Corflu, for fanzine fen.

29-31—**RiverCon, Box 58009, Louisville KY 40258. (502) 448-6562.** Kelly Freas, fan S. Jeude.

29-Aug. 1—**AlbaCon, % Meenan, "Burnawn," Stirling Rd., Dumbarton G82 2PJ, UK.** Glasgow, U.K.

29-Aug. 1—**MapleCon, Box 3156, Stn. D, Ottawa ON K1P 6H7. (613) 741-3162.** Clement. Media con.

29-Aug. 1—**MythCon, 90 Camino Real, Berkeley CA 94705.** San Francisco CA. LeGuin. High fantasy.

AUGUST, 1988

5-7—**Conine, % Ivan Towlson, New College, Oxford OX1 3BN, UK.** Terry Pratchett. Oxford Poly campus.

5-7—**OmaCon, 2709 Everett, Lincoln NE 68502.** At the Holiday Inn Central. No guests announced yet.

5-7—**CastleCon, Box 128, Aberdeen MD 21001. (703) 360-2292.** Held near Washington. Note new dates.

10-12—**Con, Box 5703, Portland OR 97228. (503) 283-0802.** C. Q. Yarbro. "Generic SF convention." Vampires theme.

10-12—**BabelCon, 1355 Cornell SE, Grand Rapids MI 49506.** Media-oriented, but fannish (no stars).

SEPTEMBER, 1988

1-5—**NoLaCon II, 921 Canal #831, New Orleans LA 70112. (504) 525-6008.** WorldCon. $70 to 7/14/88.

AUGUST, 1989

31-Sep. 4—**Noreascon 3, Box 46, MIT PO, Cambridge MA 02139.** WorldCon in Boston. $60 to 9/15/88.

AUGUST, 1990

23-27—**ConFiction, Box 95370 - 2509 CJ, The Hague, Holland.** WorldCon. Haldeman. $60 to 12/1/88.

28-Sep. 1—**ConDiego, Box 15471, San Diego CA 92115. (619) 265-0903.** NASFiC. $45 to 10/1/88.

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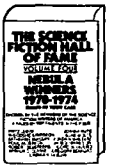

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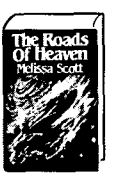

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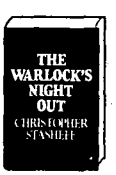

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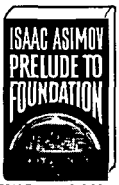

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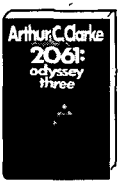

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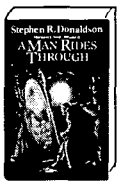

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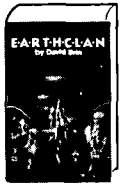

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